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A Fractured Fairytale

SASUSAKU ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE ANTHOLOGY

Thank you for supporting the Fractured Tales Project © 2010 and taking the time read the E-book version of the book, *A Fractured Fairytale: A Sasuke Sakura Alternative Universe Anthology*.

In summer of 2008, a rag-tag team of authors and artists gathered together to create a compilation of alternative universe stories and illustrations for one of the most well-known pairings in Masashi Kishimoto's work, NARUTO. With the need to express creativity by deviating from its canonical storyline, *A Fractured Fairytale: An Alternative Universe Anthology* is born. Composed of thirty-six fictions and forty images; this anthology expresses tribute for the thriving fanbase of the story of Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura.

The Fractured Tales Project © 2010 is a non-profit project that holds an invitation-only Livejournal community and was primarily kept on a low profile to ensure its completion (dated on the 18th of July 2010).

The initial plan of the project was to merely to produce an online compilation of fairytale-inspired SasuSaku stories with only four writers. However, with the proposal of turning it into a three-volume set of books, the project grew in scale and ambition ever since.

Despite not being able to push through with the “three-volume-plan”, the project was able to come up with a single book divided into three parts: Fluff, Angst, Romance. Each section follows the general format of a short story, a fanart, and a song. Each story and fanart is credited to the creators and is copyrighted under Philippine Copyright © 2010 by Fractured Tales Project; accompanied by a Disclaimer and backed by the usage of Fair Use under Section 185 of the Republic Act No. 8293 of the Republic of the Philippines. The copyright does not include the songs.



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This is an E-book version of the original *A Fractured Fairytale: A Sasuke Sakura Alternative Universe Anthology*. It is an Editor's Cut Edition which aimed to exclude the R-rated scenes, language, and other materials in some of the stories that were deemed inappropriate for people with ages fourteen and below.

We strongly discourage people requesting clients who have bought a copy of the book to post pictures of scanned pages or to type the contents of the book. Once it is proven that such cases have occurred, the E-book version available for public viewing will be temporarily or permanently (depending on the decision of the moderators) taken down.

If you really want to read the full version of each story, we recommend contacting us through fracturedtales@gmail.com. You can ask for the copy of the uncut edition of the stories to which we will gladly comply but only with proof of being in the appropriate age.

A Fractured Fairytale

SASUSAKU ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE ANTHOLOGY



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In behalf of the Fractured Tales Family, I would like to convey the most heartfelt gratitude to, first of all, my and Miko-chan's family for all the moral and financial support as well as the countless advices you gave us. Without you guys, this project would have never seen the light of day.

To the Fractured Tales family, who answered our calls and rushed to meet the deadlines without an ounce of hesitation. Thank you for sharing your talents and being a part of this crazy project. To white epitome and velvet strings, for always helping us in every way they could--especially for making the cover arts and banners impeccably beautiful. To melpomene melancholica, who unfailingly took on the jobs we weren't confident of doing, as well as becoming an idol, a confidant, and sister to us. To iulia, for her constant presence, even in the wee hours of the morning, to aid us till the very last minute, and for being a sister who dared to dream with us to create this book.

To all those who bought the book, for your faith and your wonderful words in supporting this project.

To all those who have waited for the E-book version, thank you for your patience. We hope that you enjoy reading this as we have cherished creating it.

A Fractured Fairytale

SASUSAKU ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE ANTHOLOGY







A Fractured Fairytale

A SASUKE SAKURA ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE ANTHOLOGY



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To the Fractured Tales family

To Masashi Kishimoto

To the contributors

To those who offered their help

To the ones who have been waiting for this project

To the fans, both active stans and passive lurkers

To Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura—we don't care if you are fictional.

This book belongs to you.





Preface

“Why are you doing this?”

And I felt the world stop.

I felt the combination of pure anxiety and horror—grinded, blended, squeezed—as my father asked me the question that would send me to my death, the crushing of hearts, to the oblivion that is Sai’s midriff.

Answer that fast Jam. And answer that well. Or else, all of this will just go... poof!

And the answer came to my lips, “*Pangarap po.*”

Dad could not argue with that. Nobody could argue with an answer like that: *This is my dream.*

And no matter how cheesy it is, this is simply what the book really is.

It’s a dream. It’s a tribute. *It’s faith.*

The project started as writing exercises between Miko-chan and Iulia as they lightly talked and joked about doing a compilation of short stories about the boy who seeks answers and the girl who loves him. None of us have thought that we will get to this point, that we’ll actually finish the project—because we consider it as something that will be done by other people, that it is an aspiration that is not meant to be realized by us.

But no one really knows how life turns out; and after two years since April 2008, we now hold this; *A Fractured Fairytale: A Sasuke Sakura Alternate Universe Anthology.*

It had been an exhausting road—one filled with endless drafts, simultaneous arguments, mountainous editing—but it’s the least that we can do as a tribute to the story of a boy-man with broken eyes and a girl-woman with determined gazes that we fell in love with seven years ago.

Together with 21 authors, eight artists, and many other contributors, the book brings 36 original adaptations mainly featuring Uchiha Sasuke and Haruno Sakura in settings far different from their world.

This anthology gives you a collection of tales, stories about the sweet taste of firsts and bitter sounds of heartbreaks. The stories have put the characters in worlds, featuring slices of life—bittersweet and ever so changing. Some have been made in tribute to the dark and supernatural genres that have been explored for seven years on the fandom’s fanfiction, like fallen angels, vampires, the undead and mythical creatures.



Others have dwelt on historical settings, like World War II, the Berlin Wall or the Ottoman Resistance; while a number bring life to the characters in a contemporary flare.

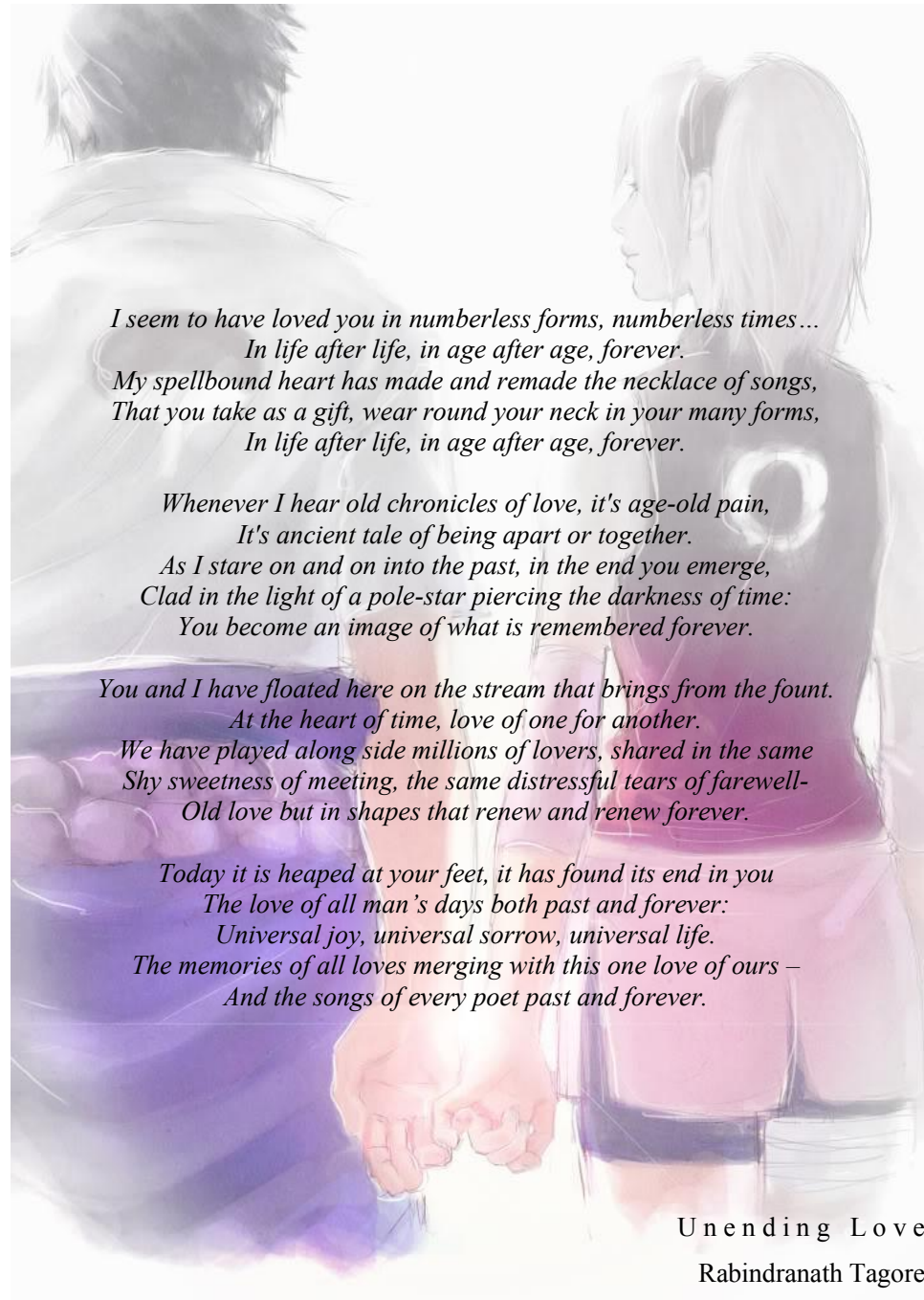
The book expounds on soul mates and second chances, on solitude and friendship, on giving up and believing. It is what I call the metaphorical paint which old and new authors of the fandom use to illustrate a world, where possibilities are explored and boundaries are stretched, into the canvas that is the reader's mind.

They are achingly beautiful yet, for the critical eye, they can be imperfect and unpolished. But isn't that how things really are? Filled with flaws and sincerity, almost drawn out of a mysterious dream, just like how these two beautiful characters are—a pairing that reflects how we view love: hopeful and resilient against the test of time.

hanabi-no-ai | 03.12.2010

"I just realized... I love their story because they taught me how to be passionate about something."





*I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times...
In life after life, in age after age, forever.
My spellbound heart has made and remade the necklace of songs,
That you take as a gift, wear round your neck in your many forms,
In life after life, in age after age, forever.*

*Whenever I hear old chronicles of love, it's age-old pain,
It's ancient tale of being apart or together.
As I stare on and on into the past, in the end you emerge,
Clad in the light of a pole-star piercing the darkness of time:
You become an image of what is remembered forever.*

*You and I have floated here on the stream that brings from the fount.
At the heart of time, love of one for another.
We have played along side millions of lovers, shared in the same
Shy sweetness of meeting, the same distressful tears of farewell-
Old love but in shapes that renew and renew forever.*

*Today it is heaped at your feet, it has found its end in you
The love of all man's days both past and forever:
Universal joy, universal sorrow, universal life.
The memories of all loves merging with this one love of ours –
And the songs of every poet past and forever.*

Unending Love
Rabindranath Tagore



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Once upon a time, there lived a genius boy who took himself too seriously and an annoying girl who managed to get under his skin. In all the infinite mirror-parallel versions of how their love came to blossom (or sputter into being), it always seemed like the universe was getting a kick out of their indignities, hijinks, and sheer pigheaded denseness. Be it the karmic justice of being reincarnated as a slimy invertebrate or the perennial awkwardness of a teen's first crush, these sweet, waffy, and even side-splitting, stories come together as fractured fairy tales.



And so the Snake Fell in Love with the Slug

A pair of protruding, wet onyx eyes—no, he corrected himself—*feelers* blearily tried to reacquaint with the surroundings after their owner ate a satisfying amount of mushrooms. Being so sated put him in an odd frame of mind. He fancied being in a form so fantastical, so far removed from his current one. Let no one suggest that perhaps he had lingered far too long over his meal. Psychedelic effects shouldn't even be mentioned.

This happened often, his thoughts wandering to the faded and frequent dreams filled with clouds of rose strands and mist of emerald stares.

He barely remembered his old, tenuous existence: a young man with assets that Narcissus would have paled at the sight of. But now, the illustrious Uchiha was reduced to this bright, daisy-shaded blob, speckled with black spots across his slippery skin.

He recalled the life of a foolish knight, set on avenging his disgraced and murdered family on his paramour's kin. But because he had already been destined to a tragic fate, he killed his princess, who sacrificed herself for his redemption. The clincher, of course, was that she violated some rule about cavorting with evil, good-looking traitors and was therefore condemned.

The gods decided to be merciful, though, and so gave them a second chance.

Now, he had to find Sakura in this... *form*.

The couple was told that this was their salvation. Heavenly compensations. Karmic justice.

Feh, he snorted.

(Well, it would have been a snort if he still had his perfect, marble-like nose.)

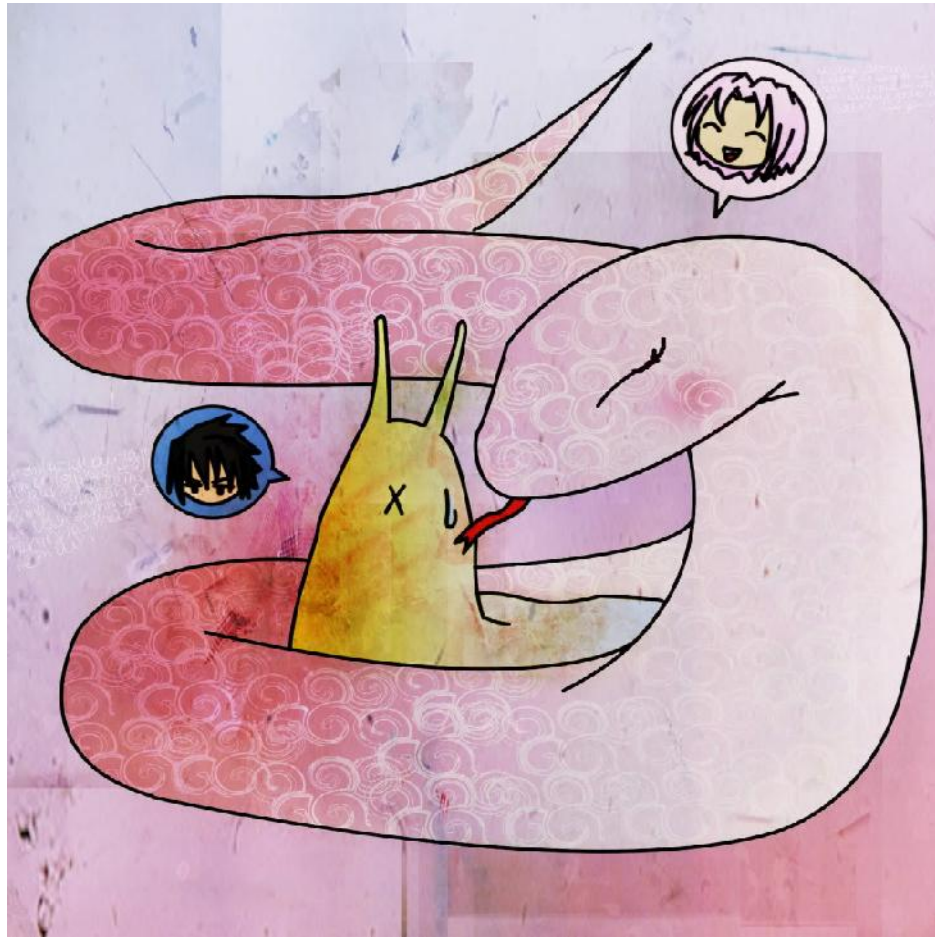
If there was one thing that Sasuke was known for in all of his lives, it was the fact that he was persistent. Sasuke was a consummate overachiever to a fault, willing to sacrifice anything to accomplish a goal he had set his sights into. So even if he only had his slimy belly as his foot, he would crawl to the ends of the earth with that single, unworthy foot just to seek her.

Tonight was very pleasant; it was already late spring, and the gales were none too frigid. It was the ideal end for the mating season. Or it would be, rather, if he did find his long-sought partner. There was no other way. Sasuke had to find his mate or be doomed with his virtue devoured, stolen the moment he lowered his guard, by the hungry, gaping maws of those vulture-like slug whores.

And he meant that literally.

Well, it was really a hard day to find a pair of green-eyes (*again, not eyes—feelers*) from the multitude of slugs in the world. But as he finally arrived at one of the slug mate soiree that he was invited to in this particular tomato garden, the marsh of





yellow slush mesmerized him. There were couples of wriggling masses, entwined grey and gold slush. He passively observed the meeting of bodies, their snug adherence like two dollops of batter being twisted together and their subsequent separation like stretchy mozzarella being forced into portions.

He was suddenly snapped out of his fascinated reverie, when a fat slimy creature (*those antenna-like eyes of hers were a glowing, greedy red, ew.*) tapped him with the tip of her tail.

"Hey, pretty slugie," she cooed, her mouth forming sucking noises as she half-stood, showing off her little sharp teeth at him. "Can I chew your banana?"

Before she was even finished talking, he answered her as calmly as possible, "No, you can't." And unlike any other indecent slug, he tried not to spit slime on her face. "Somebody already had my banana."



However, his quick dismissal was ignored by the disgusting fan slug zombie as she took a peek at his body.

"But," the shrill spurting noise was almost revolting—almost—since he also received those specks of gooey slime just as he was closing his mouth. He's much more afraid of her germs eating his more developed brain. "I can see your *banana*!"

There was not even a twitch.

"It must be taken," he answered seriously, watery onyx appendages fixed in the wide expanse of the sky as a few blossoms blew past the horizon, "by my one true love. As my sacrifice, I shall be offering it to her radula if we can't wiggle apart after our passionate joining. I can bear the shame of being a female, a slug-making machine for all of my life in compensation for my past sins."

"That's impossible," the insignificant life form replied back with more stray ooze. "You can't have your one true love. You don't even have a real brain to think that way."

Sasuke slithered away, or rather slinked away, from the place with a trail of sludge following him, offended and insulted that though he was gifted with more intelligence than the usual banana mollusk, he had yet to capture a glimpse of his beloved amidst the decaying landscape. Occupied by his colossal indignation—and the occasional munching of a stray mushroom or two—Sasuke did not seem to notice that he had already crossed the garden and was already on the field of wild cogen.

Suddenly, there was a shrill shriek.

"Shinichi!" screamed a panicking little girl, her short bob swaying as her hands waved at a young boy sitting on the fences and looking uninterestedly at them. "A slug, a slug! Bring out the salt! Faster! It looks like a banana! We can finally see if it really happens!"

Danger.

Sasuke tried to make his body move faster, but he was already panting his single lung out with the amount of exertion he had utilized the past hour.

He was about to die. The child was already holding a jar of salt when suddenly it appeared.

"KYAAA!"

But he was mistaken; it did not appear out of nowhere. It came from his rear.

"CHIAKI-KUUUN!" the child screeched in an alarming volume—he could feel the loam quake. "SNAAAKE."

Which meant that he was prey, not gastropod-in-distress, to his savior.

"GAAAH."



And so the brats scampered away, leaving him to a different, not necessarily less unpleasant, demise.

Sasuke refused to curl up on the damp earth and just accept his pending doom. He thought it would have been better if he died by being rubbed with salt instead. At least, the massage would have been good.

The first signs of trepidation overcame him. He continued to ooze slime from his pores in hopes that he wouldn't be eaten. Knowing that being as slippery as an eel, or sludge, would make it harder for him to be captured did not make him feel better—it would only make him easier to swallow.

His heart...no, *hemolymph*—it could not be called a heart if it's just a bunch of vessels being pumped with the constant twisting of his body—shriveled in vigilance.

He shouldn't be trembling. He should be facing his death like the soldier he once was, the brave man he had always been. With effort, he was about to use his powers of turning into a stone as the snake whipped its tail, probably trying to capture him. Well, he was going to survive this. He was a cool slug.

(Really cool. Read: ectothermic.)

But instead of the deadly tail wrapping around his body, it covered him with a pile of earth.

Hn—?

"Sstay there." He barely heard the warning as she went, darted away—to a couple of other garden snakes.

Great. He could self-amputate and regenerate his parts should he get caught, but it would still be impossible to survive if they were going to gang-eat him—

"No, go away." He heard the distinct shushes and hisses, in protest.

The snake was protecting him? But why—?

Now that he could fully assess the creature that stood, or rather, crawled in front of him, he was astounded with what he saw. The waxing moonlight bathed the reptile in an almost silvery glow, but he had realized that the scales were the lightest shade of coral.

And her slitted eyes were not the usual moss color (*and how did he feel that this was a female, a woman...*)

"Hi?"

She was here.

"You look..." Her voice was still as angelic as ever, sans her sporadic hissing and spitting, "disgusting."

"How did you—"



"Sasuke," The female serpent snapped a fangy grin. "I was having my two week-long beauty sleep. You know what snakes do." She slithered closer to him, encircling him like a distant embrace in welcome. "I remember you used to have Manda, right? It's spring. Mating season. So after I starved myself, I went on a hunt and then...."

"I smelled *it*..." He couldn't believe that she reincarnated into one of the most beautiful animals he had ever known. "I could recognize that scent anywhere, of mixed pine and smoke and ah, even when it's buried under all that unflattering slime. Yellow doesn't really suit you. Well, maybe orange will do wonders with your complexion."

Her unique delectable aroma of cherries and vanillin, assaulted his senses. And he then started curling up to the creature that he had been waiting for all his life.

He was absolutely pleased when Sakura seemed to be ecstatic in being slathered by his foot. Slithering through the smooth textured skin that belonged to her, he was about to put his protruding mouth over the petals of her cloaca when—

BANG!

"Naruto."

There was a dangerous growl that made the astounding nanny of the night look up from the nest of black-haired, green-eyed babes.

"Get," Sasuke snarled, storming into the porch as he clutched the door knob that was in danger of being torn off, "out."

"You party pooper! We're just getting to the good part." He flipped another page on the thick, leather-bound tome. "This is better than watching those boring documentaries that you keep around the house. I had to unglue them from the TV. They're so addicted to those science—what? *Ino goes Wild* geographic shows! This is way more—"

"Or I swear in everything that's holy," Sasuke whipped up the speaker phone from the bedside table. There was an unspoken warning that after using the mobile, he would definitely crack it over Naruto's empty skull, "Sakura will make you go."

"Bedtime, kids!"

There was a chorus of protest from the distraught daughters of the Uchiha household: a wailing "WAAAH, DADDY! NOOO, FINISH IT, UNCLE," a demanding "WE WANNA KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM," and a worried "WON'T LADY SNAKE GET STUCK AND SUCKED BY KNIGHTY SLUG? O-OR HE MIGHT EVEN DIE!"

Their father merely glared at the grinning Naruto.

The brief impasse was then followed by a cacophony of snuffles.

The youngest of the cornucopia, who happened to be the only boy, had merely been observing his sisters from a distance under the gleam of his wiry glasses, flipping



what seemed to be a thick tome of colorful images. Sasuke should have paid more attention to this particular action, but he was still distracted by his female triplets, all of whom were flashing pleading, half-chiding looks at him and their uncle-by-*bestfriendship*.

Looking a bit lost, Naruto could only watch as the three little girls turned their best pitiful puppy-eyed expressions to full-blast, wordlessly begging Daddy for the story's conclusion.

It came with an explosive sigh: "Snake kisses the slug."

The blond hid a growing smirk. He just knew Papa Sasuke could never do anything that would disappoint his lovely girls.

"He turns into a prince. She turns into a princess."

The sly, fox-like grin widened. "And they lived happily ever after," Naruto finished with flourish. "Isn't that nice?"

When Naruto had exhausted reading Sakura's collection of childhood fairytales, the dumb idiot took upon the challenge to be the *best storyteller in the world, believe it!* Who knew that the dead last could be so creative? They began talking about amphibians, flying ninjas and neon-orange candy villains that would eat you if you didn't brush your teeth. It was a blessing at first, since it kept the children preoccupied while the couple did their jobs. But god help him! One day, Sasuke recognized the softly-spoken opening scenes being cited from the latest *Icha Icha Beginnings*. His tiny lasses were but four.

Even worse, Ita-chan seemed to have soaked up the whole thing with his sponge-like mind and recited the whole damn book at the breakfast table. He was also at the wonderful age of four that time.

This resulted to Sasuke being left in charge to arrive in their one big-family bedroom at exactly nine p.m. sharp.

"Yes. End of the story." He would not allow their innocent ears to be corrupted by any ear-cringing details. "Go to sleep."

There was a collective cheer, and the girls hopped over the thick coverlet to kiss the now-relieved Papa on his cheeks, who was mentally giving himself a triumphant pat on the back for solving the dilemma.

His son, upon whom Sakura doted often enough to be spoiled, now turned its attention onto the scenario. Diving under the sheets with his sisters, young Itachi was very reserved as his sisters pestered the boy to stop reading and *won't Ita-chan sleep already?* They cosseted their charming little brother in their efforts to persuade him.

Taking off the little one's glasses and closing off his book, Sasuke had the tenacity to repress the urge to run when he caught a glimpse of what his boy was reading: his mother's old pre-med biology text.



"But Dad," Itachi-kun asked with a confident smile, knowing that his parents knew everything because they always had these intellectual discussions during bedtime, ever since he learned to multiply three digit numbers mentally. (*He was 39 months old then.*) "How can a slug become a prince if he still has both of his genitalia? And if apophallation occurred during their courtship ritual, shouldn't it have become the princess?"

Naruto went cross-eyed.

Sasuke swore that he saw blood leaking from the poor idiot's ears. At any rate, he didn't have time to give the beating his so-called *bestfriend* deserved. He had to talk very, very fast to save a young and impressionable mind from the mires of moral destitution.

The next day, Sakura just arrived from her graveyard shift, expecting a warm plate of toast, eggs and milk from her darling babies. She never felt tired during mornings, especially when it was time to spend traditional Saturday morning cartoons with them.

Lo and behold, her little girls were watching, squeeing often in admiration, a Nat Geo *Gone Wild* episode.

"Ita-chaaan, wanna watch *The Miracle of Life*? They remind me of Princess Slugy!"

"Eeeh! But Slugy is a Prince. Daddy said so!"

"But Ita-chan is a weasel! Uncle said weasels are smart! Smarter than Daddy! Do you want more eggs, Ita-chan?"

"...Yes, please, onesama."

Sakura glared at Sasuke.

"It's the idiot," he retorted his only and purely valid excuse for not tuning them to Disney Channel.

And because it was tradition, Sakura only gave him a critical eye, pecked a soft kiss on his left twitching brow, and proceeded to save her children from becoming genius spawns (*like a certain disreputable relative she would not name.*)

"Who wants to watch *UP*?"

"Mama!"

"We need a new babysitter," Sasuke told his wife gravely.

"Naruto's doing fine," she said dismissively. She was concentrating on the documentary on rainforest carnivores, which was incidentally on *Animal Planet*, after *UP*



finished playing. “Besides, who was the cheapskate who bullied his best friend into this unpaid sideline stint?”

Sasuke wasn’t happy about being reminded, actually.

“I’m almost done with my residency, so. . . Anyway, what’s with the kids’ newfound obsession on slugs?”

Sakura thought he might have blinked. Maybe.

“Who knows how things catch their attention these days,” he answered coolly. “Wormholes and M-string theories. . . Taylor Swift and Taylor Lautner. . .”

“Those were Ita-chan’s interests last month, dear. Come to think of it, it’s always his interests that catch on.”

“*Final Fantasy IX* and . . . Kuja’s codpiece.” There was a hint of nausea in her husband’s mutter. “Your children are monsters.”

She could distinctly remember the cries of, *DADDY~ WEAR THEM TO PROTECT THE FAMILY JEWELS! KYAAN~*, but she tried not to laugh for his dignity’s sake. “I believe, they get it from your side of the family,” she said primly. “Besides, whose brother was it that introduced RPG & FPS to a triplet of eight-year old girls?”

“Remind me not to invite niisan till they’re at least thirty years old. Can you imagine once they’re in puberty?”

But Sakura didn’t get a chance to answer the strange query, as she was distracted by a faint snuffle behind her.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Immediately, the pink-haired doctor turned her attention to her youngest child.

Itachi had fallen asleep once the credits started rolling but was now standing beside her, clutching a blanket. “Did you have a bad dream?”

The sniffles turned to a full-blown wail as the little prodigy buried his face on his mother’s chest. Sakura turned to her husband with a puzzled look, who merely shook his head once.

“Ita-chan?”

“D-D-Daddy. . .”

She sighed. “What did Daddy do this time?”

Sasuke gave her a dirty look. She waved him away imperceptibly.

“W-What if M-Mama’s c-c-cloaca was too s-strong? And D-Daddy—Daddy’ll autotomize like P-P-Prince Sluggy and... and... WON’T HE BECOME A PRINCESS TOO?”



Sakura's expression was bewildered now. It always gave her a turn whenever her baby was actually acting and talking his age—sprinkled lightly with the usual hifalutin words like meningococemia prophylaxis or Milankovitch cycles.

"Cloaca?" she repeated. "Autotomize? What on earth—"

"Mama!" the boy sounded urgent now. "I lied, mama! I don't want a baby brother, I really don't. I want Daddy to stay as Daddy. I want Daddy! I don't want another Mama! There is only one Mama!"

"W—"

"I saw Daddy kissing Mama," Itachi accused.

"But you see that all the—"

"I saw Mama chewing on Daddy's earlobe!"

". . ."

"It starts like *that*, doesn't it?" the boy demanded angrily. "Then, then, like Prince Slugy and Princess Snake, you'll cover each other with slime and goo and—and—you'll be biting and nudging each other and—and— put your heads together and—and—twist around *like corkscrew* and—and—lie around for hours and *hours* on end!"

"Uchiha Itachi, you stop it this instant!" his father thundered. "You're upsetting your mother—"

"AND AT THE END!" Ita-chan continued stubbornly. "And at the end, if-if D-Daddy's retractor muscle isn't strong enough to pull away, and Mama's *teeth* catches him—WE WON'T HAVE A DADDY *ANYMORE*! NOOO, DADDY! I love Daddy! I love Prince Slugy! Huuuh. . ."

The said Daddy was rendered speechless. His proud little boy was hugging him of his own accord? True, the little bugger was also sniveling all over his favorite dress shirt, never mind that he just compared his own parents' activities. . . to hermaphroditic banana slugs, but *awww*. . . what a cute kid.

Mommy, meanwhile, was busy putting two and two together.

"N-NARUTO! Where is that bastard? I am going to GUT him! WHAT THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN TEACHING MY CHILD?"

Somewhere else, a certain Uzumaki Naruto was about to click on a YouTube video entitled: *banana slugs—autoapophallation*, unaware of the extensive therapy he would need to undergo the next following months.

Before He Cheats





“Don’t you think you’re overreacting?”

Sakura patted her baseball bat lovingly.

“...Even just a *little*?”

She then glanced at Ino, who was staring at her with a weary smile.

“I am *not* overreacting!” Sakura yelled, smashing the headlights of the car that just so happened to belong to her boyfriend—*ex-boyfriend*! “He *cheated* on me!” Sakura screeched. She stepped on the tire to lift herself onto the hood. Her cell phone rang but when she saw who the caller was, she threw it away, effectively *breaking* the device. “He *just* proposed to some pretty little blonde!”

“Yeah but...”

Ino smiled jadedly.



“Do you really think trashing his car is necessary, Sakura?”

“I DO!”

Standing on the very top, Sakura bent over slightly and hit the front windshield, shattering the glass to hundreds of pieces after a few attempts.

“He’s a *bastard!*” the pink-haired girl continued. “THE BIGGEST BASTARD IN *THE* HISTORY OF BASTARDS! A BIG, FAT—BUT NOT REALLY FAT-FAT—CHEATING BASTARD! I HATE HIM, I HATE HIM, I *HATE* HIM!” She then jumped off of the trashed black SUV and pulled a Swiss Army knife out of her back pocket. She went over to the back tire—

“Sakura!”

—and stabbed it.

“Okay, Sakura, if you weren’t holding a knife, I’d *so* go over there and stop you right now,” Ino grumbled, looking down at her nails and frowning at a tiny crack at the tip of one. “But really, Sakura, just *calm down*, please. I’m sure Sasuke has a perfect explanation—”

“NO!”

With a bit of a struggle, the enraged Sakura dragged the knife down the thick rubber, widening the hole she created. When the tire was ruined to a satisfying extent, she tucked the weapon back to her jeans.

“Ino, I saw him—with my own freaking eyes—get out some stupid and beautiful and perfectly Sakura-ish ring and then *propose to some girl!*” she shrieked.

After finishing with the tires, she kicked its rims for the sake of trying to do some damage, and then took out her house key, digging it into the side of his car. She growled slightly as she ruined the doors’ flawless paintjob.

A tear or two fell from her eyes but she furiously wiped them away with the back of her hand.

“He is *so* gonna regret cheating on me!”

“Ah, Karin...” Sasuke greeted tonelessly. “You’re...”

He *almost* gagged.

“Blonde.”

His twin smiled at him brightly and flipped her bleached locks over her shoulder, flirtatiously smiling at the men at the nearby tables. Sasuke fought the urge to roll his eyes at her annoying actions, but he had been stuck with the girl since conception so he was used to it.



Nevertheless, the one thing that he would probably never get used to was her constant need to dye her hair.

She had had black hair as a child but ever since she turned ten and became aware of how diverse colors could be, she started experimenting on stuffs—like dyeing her hair. He remembered that she tried to be a redhead once, and then a brunette.

And now a blonde.

“You look terrible,” he told her bluntly. “I’m ashamed to be related to you.”

Karin stopped in flipping her hair to gawk at Sasuke and immediately glared. “How dare you! You’re the one who made me come out here to help you with god-knows-what, Mr. Mysterious and Moronic! Yesh! Now, make it quick, I have a photo shoot at five.”

“...It’s only *ten-thirty*. We’re having *brunch*, idiot.”

She rolled her eyes and flashed him a toothy grin.

“*Fine*,” she said. “The truth is, I just can’t stand to be in your presence for more than three minutes—” With a dramatic gasp, she looked down at her designer watch and then smirked back at Sasuke. “And oh, well would you look at that, it’s already *been* three minutes. I guess I should be on my way.”

Sasuke rubbed his temples.

“God, do you *ever* shut up?” he growled.

“Tch, do you ever stop being a prissy bitch?”

“Oh, that’s rich coming from *you*.”

“WHAT IS THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?”

With a huff, she crossed her arms and glared at her little brother.

“Seriously though, what do you want?” Karin asked. Her voice was almost concerned, but Sasuke knew better.

“Do you remember my girlfriend—”

“I thought you were gay.”

“—*Sakura*.”

Laughing at how easy it was to goad Sasuke, Karin slowly nodded.

“Yes, I do. Pink hair, green eyes?” she inquired rhetorically. “Yes, I remember her. She’s quite the pretty one, you know,” she commented, thinking back on two Christmases ago when Sasuke had brought his lady-love to meet the family. That was the last time Karin had seen the girl due to her busy schedule as a model, but she remembered how well she thought that the Sakura girl suited her grumpy twin. “What’s a cutie like her still doing with a loser like you?”



As she giggled at her own joke, Sasuke counted to ten under his breath.

After a minute, Karin calmed down and asked, “So really, Sasuke, what do you want?”

“...I need help.”

She raised a blonde eyebrow.

“With what?”

Sakura stretched her arms over her head and let out an unladylike yawn as she walked home from the hospital. She was in her second year of residency at Konoha General and she just finished a forty-hour shift. Well technically, it was only thirty-eight hours, since she left earlier because she just couldn’t wait to go home and sleep.

Sasuke was probably home, she thought as she walked towards their shared condominium. His family owned a few of Konoha’s hottest night clubs and just recently opened a restaurant, which was currently a celebrity hangout. He usually worked there with the precious Blackberry she had bought him for Valentine’s Day a few months ago.

There were only a few things Sasuke loved in the world, and Sakura knew each and every one of them.

His mother, of course.

(At one point, his sister was in the list but Sasuke proved her wrong time and time again whenever the redhead—or was it brunette?—was mentioned. Apparently, she was the cause of his hatred towards clowns, makeup and just about anything with sugar.)

Their—or well, more so *his*—pet snake Manda, who gave Sakura the chills whenever it stuck its tongue out in her direction.

The Blackberry Curve, which he needed for work.

Tomatoes.

His pretty little souped-up four-wheel drive, that he spent much of his university years prettying.

(Even Sakura loved that thing. It was kind of what brought them together. Sakura’s dad and her older brother owned the repair shop, which Sasuke had showed up at many years ago looking for something she knew nothing about when she just so happened to be lurking in the garage. He had asked her about something car-related, and she only managed to reply with a “huh?” before her dad came to save their customer.)

Lastly, there was...

Her.

Sakura.



He was very subtle in showing her that fact, if he ever did it at all. Sasuke did not do bouquets of flowers or boxes of chocolate—although sometimes, she wished he did—but he was always there when she needed him and while they were together, he made sure she never had to want—

Her stomach grumbled.

Speaking of wants, apparently, the last few granola bars and cups of coffee were not doing much to sate her hunger. She looked down the road and saw the small café where she and Sasuke had their first actual date for brunch (it was supposed to be for breakfast, but she ended up waking up late).

When he had asked her out, she thought he was weird asking for breakfast. But being the nutrition-freak that he was, Sasuke merely told her about the importance of the said meal—especially for her, with her long hours and hectic job.

As she approached the quaint restaurant, hoping to get a table on the deck and find a newspaper someone left behind, she gawked at what she saw.

There, sitting at a table in the center of the deck was Sasuke.

With some bleach-blonde tramp who seemed to be flirting.

Sure, Sasuke was rolling his eyes over and over and was staring at the blonde skank—*girl*—apathetically, but Sakura still saw *red*.

“OH. MY. GOD.”

Karin threw her head back and laughed loudly, uncaring about all the people staring at her.

“You need my help *proposing* to your little girlfriend?”

Repeating Sasuke’s predicament only made things funnier.

The blonde clutched her sides as she gasped for air. She could feel Sasuke’s heated glare on her but paid it no heed. It was not every day her younger—by *two minutes and five seconds*!—brother would come to her for advice on women.

“I don’t need your help,” Sasuke hissed, taking offence from her words. “I would simply like your advice.”

Karin calmed down and rolled her eyes. She then sighed and propped her head up with her palm as she leaned against the table.

“Well show it to me, idiot,” she ordered.

He frowned.



“Show me the *ring*,” she clarified. Karin felt as though she was talking to a retard—although at the moment, she technically was, since Sasuke was one when it came to matters of love and romance—her younger twin truly *was* in need of special help.

“Oh. Right.” Sasuke stuck his hand in his pocket and retrieved the small velvet case. He held it in one hand and opened it for Karin with the other. “Here. What do you think?”

When she saw it, Karin gasped and her eyes widened slightly.

Sasuke looked happy. He relished the moment—it was not every day his sister would just shut the hell up.

But he knew her silence was too good to be true.

“What? Is it too plain or something?”

Karin shook her head, still not speaking. “No, Sasuke...” She looked up from the ring to her brother. “It’s perfect for her.”

Sasuke scowled. “You don’t even know her.”

She rolled her eyes then stared back down at the engagement ring. It was a simple silver band with a rectangular diamond gracefully enhanced by two triangular side stones. She knew if Sasuke had wanted to, he could have bought Sakura a much more extravagant ring, but it was a matter of how well the piece of jewelry would suit her, and Karin knew that Sakura would love what Sasuke had gotten.

“Yes,” Karin replied honestly. “But I do know she’ll love this.”

Sasuke’s face softened and he faintly smiled. “Thank you.”

She nodded.

A short moment of peace passed between the siblings but both knew it would not last.

Karin grinned widely and put a hand over the one Sasuke was using to hold the box.

“...Can I try it on, please?”

“He is *so* gonna regret cheating on me!”

Sakura picked up the baseball bat she had discarded earlier to resume hitting the car.

“I HATE HIM! I HATE HIM! I—”

“Love him,” Ino interrupted. “Obviously, this is a love-thing. If you hated him and he cheated on you, I highly doubt you would react like this. If you hated him, you would be out sipping a latte and reading a smutty novel, not destroying his car—”



“INO, WOULD YOU JUST SHUT UP?”

She didn’t.

“—nope, this is a love thing. Love is what’s making you react like this.”

“GO AWAY. YOU’RE NO HELP TO THE MATTER AT HAND—”

“Give me that!” Ino ordered. She took the Louisville Slugger out of Sakura’s flailing hands and threw it to the ground. She then grabbed the girl by the shoulders and forced Sakura to look her in the eyes. “I know you’re hurting right now Sakura, but you need to calm down.”

“Shut up!” Sakura yelled as she stepped away from the blonde. “We’re in my dad’s shop, not the hospital. Go work your psych magic somewhere else!”

“Sakura...”

Ino sighed as she looked at the mess that was Sasuke’s car. Sakura sure as hell was going to have a lot of explaining to do when her dad sees the destruction his little goodie-goodie *angel* did to his best customer’s car.

“Are you absolutely *positive* Sasuke was cheating?” Ino asked.

“...No.”

Her blue eyes widened at Sakura’s response.

“WHAT?” she yelled. “You destroyed his car without even *knowing* for sure that he cheated on you?”

“...Yes.”

“There’s no answer,” Sasuke muttered, throwing the phone onto the couch. “It’s going straight to her voicemail.”

“Maybe she realized you’re a loser and decided to leave you,” Karin drawled as she twisted her hair into a sophisticated but casual bun with the help of the tiny mirror in her compact. “I would to, if I were her.”

“Would it kill you to just shut up?”

“Would it kill you to take that stick out of your ass?”

Sasuke paid her insult no heed and began looking through his cell phone’s phonebook for Sakura’s pager number.

“She said she was coming home around noon, at the latest,” Sasuke said, paging his girlfriend. “Where the hell is she?”

“Well, you already heard what I had to say,” she murmured, standing up from her seat in Sasuke’s dining room.



She put the compact back in her designer purse and began heading towards the door with Sasuke following behind her. After slipping on her boots, she looked at Sasuke one more time. Her twin actually looked nervous.

Karin rolled her eyes.

“It’ll be *fine*,” she reassured. She pecked him on the cheek, barely even touching him and gave him a small hug—

Right when Sakura decided to come home.

Sakura’s jaw dropped for a second before she regained her composure only to lose it again as she grew livid.

I can’t believe him! In our apartment! ARE YOU SHITTING ME?

“Ah, Sakura.”

Karin—not as dumb as her brother—understood the expression on the girl’s face and tried not to snort. Did Sakura *really* think Sasuke was cheating on her? The idiot barely showed interest in one girl, how could he do it for *two*?

“Oh, *please*,” Karin sniggered. She pushed away from the hug and stepped towards the door. “It was nice seeing you again, Sakura.”

With her final words said, Karin left the apartment—

“I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU!”

Sasuke winced when Sakura’s fist came into contact with his arm. Her face was red and her eyes were watery and she looked like she had been crying. “What’s wrong with you?” he muttered, trying not to seem *too* concerned—that just might ruin his image.

She hit him again.

“How can you even *ask* that!” Sakura yelled. “You’re *cheating* on me! DID YOU REALLY THINK I WOULDN’T KICK YOUR ASS WHEN I FOUND OUT?”

“...*Cheating*?” Sasuke looked rather annoyed. “What the hell made you think I’m *cheating* on you?”

“Uh, hm, the hot blonde that totally just walked out of here!” she growled back, waving her arms wildly. “How could you, Sasuke? What, in our bedroom too, huh—”

“Ew. Don’t even say that.”

Sakura felt her heart breaking at the way he was acting. Didn’t he care? Didn’t he care even just a little bit that he was hurting her?

“Why not?” Sakura whimpered. “It’s the truth, isn’t it?”



Sasuke snorted. “Fuck no.” He pulled her crying form into his warm embrace and wrapped his arms around her trembling form. Reluctantly, she buried her face into his chest and he rubbed her back awkwardly, hoping to make her feel better. “Sakura, that was my *sister*...”

She pulled away after a moment to blink at him confusedly.

“...What?”

He sighed. “That girl—the ‘hot blonde’ as you so eloquently and falsely put it? That was Karin.”

“No...” Sakura wiped at her tears and then frowned at him. “Karin’s a redhead...”

“Yeah, she *was*,” Sasuke corrected. “She said she dyed her hair last week or something.”

“B—But!” Sakura shook her head furiously, struggling to come to terms with what she saw and Sasuke’s explanation. “I saw you propose to her! You gave her a ring! She even put it on!” She sputtered her next few words, still very confused. “I *saw* you! You and your ring—your perfect, perfect ring for...”

And suddenly, she understood the ring and Karin and Sasuke’s recent secretiveness.

“Me?”

“Hn...” Sasuke reached into his pocket and then opened the box in front of Sakura. “Yeah, it’s for you. I was planning to propose to you back at the café since I’m sure you would’ve liked that, but I guess this’ll do—”

He was cut off by her lips on his and the air being knocked out of his lungs as she tackled him to the ground. Straddling his hips, she proceeded to kiss him until he put a hand on her shoulder to gently push her away despite her eager attempts to continue.

“Nn... Sakura, stop...”

She paid him no heed.

“Your dad told me my car wouldn’t be ready this afternoon.”

Still on top of him, Sakura froze and struggled to figure out what to do. She thought back to the car she demolished out of blind rage and tried to figure out how she would cover up the fact that she did it—which would be hard, considering she had carved her name into the driver’s seat.

She laughed awkwardly and affectionately drew patterns on his chest.

“Oh. Right. About that...”



Cannonball

Sasuke had always been a horrible swimmer.

He was too tense, too aware, too sure—too stiff, like boards, like walls, like pride.

Sakura laughed at him a lot of the time, but she was rude that way, and he had accepted it as part of her—resigned himself to a small eternity of her hushed sighs and constant interruptions. She poked him in the shoulder, her nail digging near his bone, when he explained this with the patience that usually characterized her, moments before a fit of pique.

“You’re annoying,” he grouched, tired and wet—soaking in too much river water, slowly drying under the sunlight. He kicked small stones out of his sandals with a frown. His hair hung limp, and decidedly undignified—a waterfall in blue-black. “You talk too much. And you play around, and act less-than-half your age. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Oh, be quiet,” Sakura said, playfully. “You’re just angry because I had to *rescue* you.” She smiled, vaguely wicked, and entirely unsettling. “I had to save you from drowning—like you were some pretty, pretty princess.”

“Che,” Sasuke said, making a face. “I can still taste you.” Sakura colored a bit at the reminder, but recovered admirably. Thankfully, Sasuke didn’t comment. “And I wouldn’t have fallen in, if you hadn’t been having those odd muscle spasms on the dock.”

“I was *dancing*!”

“You were *flailing*,” he sneered.

“Yeah? Well, you float like a rock, you uptight jerkface!”

“Hn,” he said—grunted—his generic response to everything save catastrophe, and annoying as it was to be in her debt, it wasn’t quite *that*. He bent over, hands on his knees—shook his head to rid it of the wetness—purposely dripping on her brand new sandals in the process. Sakura shrieked—as he knew she would—before falling in a clumsy heap.

“Well, you’re frumpy,” she said, trying very hard to be appropriately angry, though her smile was ruining the overall effect. “You’re frumpy, and boring, and dull. If I hadn’t been around, you would’ve fallen into your unnecessarily deep, dark, dank pit of teenage angst. And you would’ve stayed there until the time came for you to sell your soul to Armani, and walk around with your Blackberry, and your nose up—your eyes to the sky. What with the way you would have gone, you would have forgotten what the ground looks like. You should be thankful you have me around to save you from





yourself.” She patted herself on the shoulder, her features artfully arranged in an expression of mock-suffering.

“And what would be so wrong with that?” he asked, intrigued by the last comment, even as he ignored the rest of her spiel. “After you’ve spent these five years telling me to aim high, and reach for the sky, I’d think you’d be delighted.”

“Yes, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura said, leaf-green eyes now wide and serious. “Reach for the sky. But don’t ever forget what the ground feels like underneath your feet. Touch the sky, but not at the expense of losing your ground.”

“...Whatever. That doesn’t even make sense, and you talk too much,” he said, annoyed again at her flights of fancy. Sakura was impossible, he thought, as he watched her fold their blanket, and then pick up the leftovers from their impromptu picnic. Bookish, but dreamy, and disappointingly romantic—she was a study in opposites. At once fickle and obstinate, firm but kind—and he hated how inadequate it was, that she’s—vexing, and soothing, all in one breath.

“What are you staring at,” she said, her voice softer now, as she held the wicker basket containing half-a-bowl of watermelon close to her chest. Her green eyes were wide and fixed on his face, uncertainty and hesitation etched on her every feature. He smirked at her lack of artifice. Sakura’s face read like a favorite novel—an old book, with familiar lines and creases.

“I’m sorry. I thought I heard some low buzzing sound from the vicinity of my ankles. Would you happen to know—ow! Damn it, stop hitting me, you harpy!”

“I’m not short!”



There was an unconventional sort of liberation in her pink hair, he thought, as he smirked inwardly at the way her cheeks puffed out with all her ire. There was a sense of resolve in her green eyes—a freedom that allowed dissonance, a freedom to be mismatched, to be—

To be.

Sakura liked to touch him.

He could never tell if she meant to—mostly, they were brushes of her hand against his, nudged shoulders, poked sides and, on one occasion, three accidentally-tangled fingers on the way home from school.

“Sorry,” she said, when they reached his home, hoping his mother had not seen their hasty disentanglement. Her cheeks just barely matched her hair, and had he been the type, he would’ve smiled a little at her flustered state. As it was, Sasuke pretended he didn’t notice the flush on her cheeks, pretended he had not heard his mother’s gentle teasing, and that he had not noticed his father’s quiet approval.

Itachi smirked, looking comfortable and cool from his position against the kitchen countertop.

“What’s this, Sasuke? What kind of gentleman allows the girl to walk him home?”

“Are you staying for dinner, Sakura-chan?” Mikoto asked, while behind her Sasuke’s eyes promised retribution for Itachi’s quip.

“I—um, I, that is—” Sakura began, fumbling over her words, and her hands fluttering at her sides. She had known Sasuke for five years, and that had been her first invitation. Sasuke had always ushered her out the door with all due haste, and now—stuttering and awkward waif that she was—blocking the light and, bungling her first impression, Sakura thought rather dismally that she understood why. Thankfully, Sasuke’s mother had the goodness to rescue her from the sea of incoherency.

“Yes, by all means, Fugaku, let’s set another place,” Mikoto said, answering her own question. “We’d love for you to stay, wouldn’t we Sasuke?”

“I just spent the last eight hours—whatever. Sakura, do what you want,” he grumbled, and turned away from her bright eyes to reach for a freshly-baked biscuit.

Sakura’s smile strained at his reaction and grew tight at the corners, and she shook her head, in an effort to avoid Fugaku’s knowing eyes.

“Maybe another time, Uchiha-san. I need to get home.”

She slipped out, amidst protests, shaking her head and smiling wide-open, like windows in June. Sasuke looked at her retreating form from his seat at the dining room table, noting with practiced ease the amount of effort she expended to avoid looking at



him. He could have been nicer, he supposed. But he couldn't understand why she had taken such offense. He had said much worse, and had ignored her more thoroughly on other occasions.

Perhaps there was something else on her mind. He would ask her about it tomorrow, Sasuke decided, before tucking into his dinner.

Sasuke was thoroughly confused.

He'd tried calling Sakura when he saw her at her locker, only to be ignored. After he had hastily stuffed the rest of his books into his own meager space, he had walked to the end of the hall where she was making the turn to go to homeroom. When she had heard his footsteps, she had quickened her pace, almost as though she was avoiding him. To make things worse, he had been waylaid by that idiot Naruto, who insisted time-after-time that they were rivals, and that Sasuke had better watch out because Naruto had been *watching* him, *and no, not in the happy way, you pervert—ugh, no!* And now, he was in the middle of receiving a brain-numbing lecture on the “many reasons you suck, and should bow down to my incredible awesome,” garnished with a dollop of “no wonder Sakura-chan hates you, *and your girly face*, what the hell did you *do*, you bastard?” Sasuke ignored the normal grammatically incorrect vitriol, biting back the urge to tell Naruto that he would be a hell of a lot more intimidating if he exchanged that orange track-suit for something more respectable, like, oh, maybe a *beanie*.

“What did you say about Sakura, dead-last?”

Predictably, Naruto huffed, sucking in nearly all the air in the surrounding countryside.

“I am *not* a dead-last, you stupid prissy-faced...priss!”

Sasuke sneered.

“Focus, you idiot. Sakura?”

Naruto snapped back to attention, unholy mischief lighting in his wide blue eyes.

“She hates you. She never wants to talk to you again. She asked me if she could join my—”

“—nonexistent harem,” Sasuke quipped, bored.

“—my *fancub*, you asshole, shut the hell up, with your hair gel, and your stupid eyeliner, what the hell do you know, anyway?”

“For the hundredth time,” Sasuke said, voice now sharp with impatience, “I do not wear eyeliner, and this is my hair's natural state. Not that I should be explaining myself to losers like you.”

“Ha!” Naruto gloated. “I notice you haven't denied anything I said about



Sakura-chan!”

“That’s because he knows it isn’t true, and Sasuke-kun isn’t the type to mince words,” said a new voice, floating over from the now opened doorway. Sakura stood there with a smile twitching on her lips, but she still had not deigned to give Sasuke a second glance.

“We’ve already started, and you two are officially late.” She moved her gaze to the white walls behind them both, her hands still playing with the blue tie at her neck. The amusement in her eyes was almost tangible now, and Sasuke could almost hear the giggles.

“What aren’t you telling us?”

She turned a pinched look at something over his shoulder, before replying huffily.

“Kakashi-sensei thanks you both for the extra assignment that you’ll both be presenting tomorrow morning.”

“What sort of assignment?” Naruto asked suspiciously, crush momentarily forgotten.

“You have two choices,” Sakura said, primly smoothing down the folds of her skirt. “You can either give a comprehensive report on the history of sex as conceptualized by the ancients—”

“Or?” Sasuke asked, willing her to acknowledge him.

“An interpretive dance,” she said, now addressing her green-painted nails, “depicting a fertility rite from ancient Mesopotamia, complete with full headdress. Homemade, of course.”

Naruto gaped at her in disbelief, before pouting, and then trudging into the classroom, unwilling to bear the brunt of any more punishment. Sasuke looked at Sakura, who stood holding the door open, her pink hair like a curtain around her face. There were small snuffling sounds coming from her, and—for a moment—he worried that she might have started crying.

“Sakura,” he began, almost sorry. He lifted a wavering hand to slowly nudge her chin up, but before his fingers could get within her eye’s reach, her head snapped up; and she looked at him, her white teeth poking out of her mouth to bite her lip in an effort to keep from *laughing* too loudly. Sasuke lowered his hand back to his side before she could see it, but Sakura was too busy trying to control the sudden fit of giggles that had escaped her to notice anything other than the quietly surprised look on his face.

It serves him right, she thought, as she laughed softly, her breaths coming like gasps.

Sasuke almost rolled his eyes at her immaturity, but his inbred gravity wouldn’t allow it.



“Satisfied?” he asked instead, dry like wit.

“A bit,” she said, her eyes still bright with mirth.

Your hurt, he thought, as he ushered her back into the classroom, and took his usual seat at her side, *your hurt, for my humiliation*, though he still didn’t understand yesterday’s distance.

Still, all in all, it was a fair exchange.

Sometimes, Sakura wondered when they had begun.

It was difficult to remember their meeting, she supposed, as ordinary as it had been—she had done her best to block it out. Children were cruel, she thought ruefully, and anyone who disagreed, needed only to glance at the nearest playground. There was always one who was singled out, one decidedly different, even if the reasons were unknown at the time. She’d been teased for that particular “anomaly”—because that was what she had been, even if the children had not known the word yet—past the point of tears.

And then, *she* had come, an avenging angel with sunlight in her hair and the sky in her eyes, with her red ribbons and purple barrettes, and she had pushed them away, had walked her home, had been her center.

Yamanaka Ino—who had been as loud as she was quiet, as strong as she had been weak, as bright as she had been shadowed. It was a match made of opposites, and for a while, she had thrived, picking cosmos and blowing bubbles under dappled sunlight.

And then, she remembered with barest regret, *and then, we had to go and grow up, and I went and realized that it wasn’t enough.*

She had loved Ino, and Ino had loved her, she knew.

But Ino had loved Sasuke too, and that was when the trouble had started.

“*We can’t be best friends anymore—not if we like the same guy,*” Ino had said with childlike solemnity. Her voice had not wavered, even when her resolve had.

“*So we’re rivals now,*” she had replied, not a question, not an answer.

“*I won’t lose to you, Sakura, and I won’t go easy on you.*”

“*I don’t want you to,*” Sakura had replied, returning her talisman, a strip of red she had worn in her hair every day before.

Looking back on it now, Sakura still wondered why Sasuke had chosen her.

When she asked him, all she received was his generic response—“*you were less annoying, and she was louder than your hair.*”

Still, she smiled at the memory. He had stepped in a few months after, to save



her from another of her pink-clad demons. Ino had watched from the sidelines, a look of resentment on her face, *but*, Sakura fancied, *hopefully, a bit of gratitude, too*.

As it was, their relationship consisted of a series of highs and lows, glaring matches in the halls, and stilted *hellos* whenever they happened to meet on the street.

She still missed her, but there was time, yet.

There was a little girl in her, a ghost she had yet to banish, and she preferred it that way. She wouldn't change her past, no matter how much she had cried, and hoped, and *wanted*. For one, it would have changed her present, and she was quite happy with her current state of affairs—*liar*, it whispered, fitful and honest, and she tamped that box shut—and for another...

For another, it had given her Sasuke—restitution in blue flip-flops, and black jeans, with a smell like sandalwood, with a smile like snow in July.

She was standing too close to him.

Sasuke shifted his weight, and allowed his irritation to flash across his face. The frown lines that his mother teased his father about were apparently a hereditary trait, if Sakura was to be believed.

"You could irrigate an entire *country*, Sasuke-kun, with those grooves on your forehead."

"Feh," he grunted, because she smelled like skin and rainwater, and it was terribly unromantic, and who was she to talk about foreheads? She was still *entirely too close*. "What the hell are we doing here, anyway?"

"Well, Sasuke-kun," she said, putting one slim finger on her cheek, her eyes crossed, as though she were deep in thought. "There's a Ferris wheel about fifty-three steps to the left, and a cotton candy stand due north. There are flashing lights, and crying children, and you said you'd win me a stuffed animal before night fell, so *obviously*—"

"I never said that," he interjected, before she flashed him a *look*.

"—so, *obviously*," she continued, as though he hadn't spoken, "we're at a carnival. And we're here to have fun."

"I hate fun," Sasuke groused. "I could be doing something important, like working on my college applications, or studying for our exams, or at least looking for internships. We're not all like you, with your ridiculous IQ, and your almost-top rank, and your—"

"And who, exactly," she said pointedly, poking him with each word until he felt like nothing more but a glorified pin cushion, "who exactly beat me out for my *almost*-top rank? Hm? Who?"

"Shikamaru," he answered—not without rancor—but he knew when he had lost.



“*Who else*, Sasuke-kun?”

“... You’re so annoying.”

“I thought so. Now come with me. I found a panda bear I liked three stalls over.”

She dragged him along, her small fingers clinging to his wrist with unsurprising tenacity. The bow of the yellow sundress she had chosen for the occasion fluttered behind her like some wayward butterfly. Under the cacophony of the carnival lights and screaming festivities, he caught the strands of some long-forgotten song and huffed. Sakura had been humming it for the better part of the last three days, a melody in three-quarter time.

“Stop humming already. It’s—”

“Annoying? Why do you think I do it?” she said, throwing him a thoroughly impertinent look. Sasuke felt the corners of his mouth turning up in a reluctant smile. “You’re slightly less insufferable,” she continued, “when you look at me the way you’re doing right now.”

Instantly, the smile vanished.

“Look at you like what?”

She stopped, turned around to look at him, and he was struck by how small—how *bright*—she looked against the backdrop of a starless night.

“Sometimes,” she said, softly, “sometimes, you look at me like you’ve forgotten yourself. Like I’ve made you lose a little of all your silly control. It, um, validates me, if that makes any sense. I’d love it if you could trust me enough to *fall* just a bit, but I guess there’s time for all that later, maybe, if you’ll allow it,” she finished, looking almost embarrassed by the admission.

Sasuke swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, the strings of her melody thrumming through his blood. He wondered what to say to that—what there *was* to say—but Sakura saved him as she usually did, by turning away, tangling her fingers with his, loose this time, so he could pull away when he wanted to.

He didn’t.

“Sakura’s called for you, *otouto*.”

Itachi held the phone up and away, just beyond Sasuke’s grasp, clearly delighted by the height difference.

“Itachi, you bastard! Give me the damned—”

“Sasuke-kun—your language! Really, now!”

With deft hands, Mikoto grabbed the phone away from Itachi, and gave him a



knock on the head as punishment. Sasuke felt validated for a moment, until she turned the full-force of her glare on him. Still looking at him, she pressed the *speaker* button on the handset.

“Sakura-chan,” she said, her voice now sweet, and devoid of its maternal venom. “Sasuke-kun can’t come to the phone right now, because he’s being punished for being vulgar. Is there anything you’d like to say to him? I’ve put you on speaker.”

Sasuke cursed inwardly at the muffled giggles he heard from the phone.

“*Oh, no, Uchiha-san. I’ll, um, just call back. When would be a better time?*”

“Probably soon,” Itachi put in, voice devoid of humor, though the glint in his eye told Sasuke better. “It’s never too soon to start planning the wedd—”

A barely restrained growl of fury was all the older Uchiha got before Sasuke lunged at him, hands already reaching for his throat. Mikoto stepped away to avoid being hit by a flailing limb.

“I’m sorry that my children are such boors, Sakura-chan.”

“*Oh no! Not at all.*” Sasuke heard in the midst of his impromptu throttling session, and he could almost picture her waving her hands in protest. *Stupid girl*, he thought—almost fondly—as Itachi reversed their position and left him face down with his hands behind his back.

“Good evening to you, then.”

“*Good night*,” Sakura said, and Mikoto clicked the *end* button.

“Ah,” their father said, striding into the room with his eyes on the newspaper. He gave his wife an absent pat on the head, and received a growl in return. “Very nice Itachi. Practicing your police academy techniques?”

Itachi coughed.

“Of course.”

Mikoto rolled her eyes.

It had been a bad idea to let her have that last cocktail, Sasuke realized crossly, feeling her breath skate against the nape of his neck. There were *things* pressing against his back, his long-repressed hormones cried gleefully. *Girly things! Soft, round, girly things!*

Having her legs around his waist—albeit, not in the precise way that usually preceded these *nights of passion*, or so he had heard—wasn’t helping either.

Sakura, blissfully unaware, mumbled something incoherent, and shifted on his back.



“Lightweight,” Sasuke mumbled under his breath, hoping her father was asleep. The last thing he needed tonight was an inquisition. He could already feel the beginnings of a migraine. There was a damp spot forming on the back of his navy-blue button down, and he grimaced at the clammy feel of it. *And, her moving around isn’t helping matters*, he thought rather uncharitably.

Luckily, her doorstep was only a few steps away.

He bent down, and gently unraveled her, steadying her when she wobbled, holding her against him when she started to sway.

“Can you stand?” he asked, his breath ghosting over the strands of her hair, trying not to breathe anymore of her in more than he already had. She felt heavy against him, her hands soft against the exposed skin of his arms. When she looked up, her green eyes were half-shut—deep green and slumberous—and a strap of her white camisole had fallen halfway down her arm, leaving her shoulder pale and soft and bare. Sasuke felt himself react to her, prayed that in her state, she wouldn’t notice.

“Mmm. Is it morning?” she asked, tangling her fingers into his hair, smiling up at him through sleep-drunk eyes.

“It’s past midnight. You’re at your doorstep,” he said, hoarsely. “And I’m about to put you to bed.”

“And will you be here when I wake up, later?” she asked, voice low with promise. Her fingers were weaving patterns through his hair, nonsense words in languages long dead.

“No,” he said, and wished he could forget the world, too. “No, not yet, I won’t be. And you’d hate me if I were.”

“Would I?” she asked softly, pulling him down for a good-morning kiss because it was past midnight, and he had been too surprised—too aroused—to be honorable about it.

It was as sloppy as the word recalled, she would think later—after the memory returned and she had stopped screaming incoherent curses into her pillow—and awkward, as kisses went, because she had been drunk, and he...

Well, he had been Sasuke. And still was.

(“Was that your worst kiss?” she asked him later, after the after, after the fairy-tale, still upset that it had been their first and she couldn’t quite *remember*.)

“No,” he replied, because he knew better, and she had been the only one he had ever kissed anyway—Traumatic Fourth Grade Incident with Naruto, notwithstanding—and simply because love had taught him the value of small untruths.)

Inevitably, the morning came, gently insistent, and falling on her bedroom floor.



She woke up to an aching head, and a knowing twinkle in her mother's eyes, and fielded her father's questions about his *precious Sakura-chan*, and *was it that Uchiha boy—did he hurt you? Because Daddy can take care of it, and they'd never find the body!* After a few bites of cereal, she stepped outside, calling for a respite. She took a familiar path, pushing out of the white picket fence that ran around the backyard, and brushing aside low-swept trees, lush with greenery.

The air is cleaner here, she thought, contentedly. The smell of dirt and earth surrounded her, and at her feet, she felt a terrain shift as soil became sand, and stone. She laughed—she was still in her dress from the evening before, and her heels weren't exactly made for walking down dirt paths. She bent, balancing herself against a nearby tree-trunk and slipped them off, wiggling her toes into the dirt with childlike abandon. That taken care of, she continued on her winding path, enjoying the quiet symphony.

She was unsurprised to find him there, hands folded behind his head, looking up at the beginning. He had changed, or at least, she thought he had. His shirt was a lighter blue today, and he was wearing white shorts, and the ever-present blue sandals. She clucked her tongue, deciding she would get him a different shade for his birthday next week. It wouldn't do for him to be so monochrome.

Perhaps a deep green—like leaves, or if he was so insistent on a hint of blue, perhaps something like the color of water.

The sky was still pink with morning, and rosy-fingers brushed soft strands of hair from his face, revealing milk-skin and dark eyes. He didn't stir at her approach, but she knew he was awake; and she slipped down next to him, and curled into his side, throwing her legs over to tangle with his. She traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips, smiling at the way his muscles tensed at the feather-light touch.

"Stop that," he said, voice gravel-rough, and sleep-deepened.

"Does it tickle, Sasuke-kun?" she said in reply, teasing him.

"Hn," he grunted, grabbing her wrists in a firm grip. He opened his eyes, and turned to look at her.

"Your shirt is dirty," she said, solemn, and he knew she was just two moments shy of laughing. "And your shorts probably are, too. Shouldn't you be running home to have your mother wash them?"

In response, he turned over suddenly, moving quickly so that she was lying underneath him, and he had her hands held high above her head. She was startlingly vulnerable, and yet, decidedly unafraid. He could hurt her, he thought, suddenly vicious, and his grip tightened around her wrists.

Sasuke looked at her, pink hair splayed across the damp sand beneath them, her green eyes shining with something he was still hesitant to name, her mouth delicately curved in a small smile.

Sakura was light, like air, like breath, like whispers at dawn—she was this



moment, and every moment, hopeful and indomitable, imbued with the scent of water. And maybe, and maybe, he—

No. He couldn't say it—not yet. Not now.

Instead, he bowed, nuzzling under her chin—suddenly shy—and rested his head against the hollow of her throat. He whispered to her in silence, his life's breath moving over her skin with quiet clarity. They were coming together, *almost* seamlessly, but the thread was still frayed, and there was still—

There was still growing to be done. There were bridges to cross, things to learn, and people to meet.

So, they would wait, she thought.

“So, we will wait,” he whispered.

They were young, yet, and Sakura thought perhaps, that this was the kind of thing that would only grow better with age. They were still incomplete.

But for now, they had this moment.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she said, smiling up at the sky.

Corona and Lime

Sasuke likes Sakura because in between bouts of being terribly serious—a pre-med student, member of the student leadership committee, riding a full scholarship with perfect grades—she is anything but.

He likes this because it is ever-new, and it is familiar, and no matter how much she has changed over the years (and no matter how grateful he is for this), there is some little perfect part of her that will forever be a child. And he likes that. Really.

Except when it annoys him.

Today, she is wearing an oversized tie-dye shirt, and she is smiling as he surveys her in absolute incredulity. The outfit is not the concern; he has grown used to her ever-shifting wardrobe, composed of comfort in all forms. No, what draws his skepticism is her wild query.

“What’s a good pickup line, Sasuke?” He doesn’t respond, and she waves her phone in front of his face. “No needs to know.” A swift glance down at a tiny screen and tinier words. “Apparently, this guy looks like you. So? What pickup line will work? On you?”





“No line,” Sasuke says, to this silly girl who should no longer be a girl, and who should know that pickups lines are ridiculous, anyway. In case she doesn’t: “Pickup lines are ridiculous. We’re much too old for such...” Sakura eyes him expectantly, eyebrows are raised and waiting. His mouth twists into a scowl. “For such idiocy.”

Looking at Sakura’s expression, he knows his lecture has fallen on deaf ears. There is a sudden excitement in her, in the stretch of her grin and the too-eager bob of her nod, though her tone is ever so mockingly serious as she says, “Oh, of course.”

Instinctively reacting to the jab in her words, Sasuke defends himself, “All pickup lines are stupid. They never work.”



Sakura shakes her head, the action condescending and playful, and types out a quick reply to Ino. Then, she looks up at Sasuke. “If they don’t work, you haven’t heard the right lines.” She pauses.

“So, Sasuke, what do you do for a living? Apart from being sexy, of course.”

Sasuke is annoyed.

And just like that, the game begins.

She pops up, in familiar places but with an unfamiliar goal, all smiles and smothered laughter, with some inane, often scandalous, phrase to deliver. Sasuke is sure Sakura is trying to drive him insane. He is also sure that it might be working.

The fourth line she delivers in the student union, as they eat their weekly lunch. Sakura is sick as a dog, germier as a daycare center, and Sasuke is simply trying to make sure that her ill hands keep away from his food. She is wearing massive sunglasses, despite being indoors (“I look like the love child of a drunk and someone allergic to air.”), and is breathing in such a way that makes Sasuke’s appetite disappear.

“Can you try to breathe normally?”

One second, she is looking at him with her lips (the only part of her face visible beneath those oversized sunglasses) twisting in annoyance and the next she is sneezing, the sound and motion huge, shocking. With one hand, Sakura grabs the napkin Sasuke offers, the other moving to push the glasses that had been dislodged from her face back up her nose. “Blech,” she says, and mops up the snot. “Being sick sucks.”

She puts the napkin on the table and Sasuke winces.

“Sakura, that’s disgusting.”

Sakura rolls her eyes and digs through her bag for a tissue, now that the situation doesn’t call for immediate action. “You’re such a girl, I swear. I just sneezed. And shoot, this is the last tissue in the pack.” She blows her nose, the sound loud and honking. Sasuke once again flinches back, shaking his head slightly.

Sounding nasal, Sakura laughs at him and throws her crumpled tissue at him. Dodging away, Sasuke hisses, “Sakura...”

She just smiles. And smiles wider when he reaches into his own bag and pulls out a mini-pack of tissue.

As he hands it to her, she squeezes his hand, her smile soft.

“You know Sasuke, if you were a booger, I’d pick you first.”

Hey. I need directions



Sasuke sighs down at his phone and wonders if it will be worth simply presenting Sakura with the portable GPS already sitting in his closet a month before Christmas. Not that it will do him good now, but really, the girl does get lost too frequently for her own good, and maybe it's a little nerve-wracking when she calls and tells him, "Yeah, I'm totally lost."

Where to?

While he waits for the phone to chirp, he hopes that she's not wandering around downtown this late. Again.

She responds.

ur hear t

A second later.

huh huh? 8D

Trying to scowl but failing to keep his lips from twitching up, Sasuke sends his quick No.

<3

"Hi," says Sakura, her voice muffled by loud music and Ino's shrieking. Sasuke plugs the ear not near his cell phone in hopes of hearing better.

"Hey." The music reaches a pulsing crescendo. "Where are you? I can't hear—"

"Ino! Shut that thing the hell up!" The music stops. Sakura's voice comes back.

"Sorry, Sasuke, I'm at Ino's."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I just drove her home. She's pretty drunk."

Sasuke snorts. "I'll bet she is."

He can hear the smile in Sakura's voice. "Of course. So, Sasuke... Hi."

Though she cannot see, Sasuke's eyebrow raises. He is silent.

"Did it work?" she finally asks, voice tinted in excitement.

"Did what work?"

"My pickup line."

For a single second that only lasts as long as the flare of annoyance, Sasuke considers hanging up. But he doesn't, settling instead for a long-suffering sigh and a, "Sakura..."



“Ino said ‘hi’ would work!” Her voice is suddenly distant. “You pig! You were wrong! Apparently, not all guys respond to that!” Vaguely, Sasuke hears Ino’s screeches of denial. “Not at all?” Sakura’s voice is back in his ear.

“Not at all.” And then, since Sakura cannot see, Sasuke allows himself a tiny, exasperated smile.

“Pity... Well, in that case, I better go, Sasuke. Ino and I have to go eat a gallon of ice cream. Talk to you later, ok?”

“Goodbye,” Sasuke says.

“Bye!”

Rolling his eyes, Sasuke shoves his phone back in his pocket and once again begins to muddle through his macroeconomics homework.

“Who was that?”

Sasuke looks up, and Itachi is standing in the doorway, arms crossed, still in his suit.

For a second, Sasuke panics. My girlfriend? No, then his older brother will demand to meet her right then. My friend? That will lead to more questions, which will still lead to Itachi demanding to meet her.

“Sakura,” he says, grateful that his voice is at least steady.

“And who might ‘Sakura’ be, that she feels she can call you this late?”

Shit, thinks Sasuke.

“Well, we—” he stutters and he hates himself for it. “We’re ... dating, I guess.”

“You guess, Sasuke?”

“We’re dating.”

“Ah.” Itachi smiles then, and Sasuke is very, very afraid. “I didn’t know you had a girlfriend, otouto. I will have to meet her then, won’t I?”

“Sakura.”

She ignores him. In time to the music being pumped into her ears, her head bobs and her steps sway. Sasuke rolls his eyes.

“Sakura.”

Finally, he reaches out, snags the thin, plastic-covered wire, and tugs. As the ear bud—still making a sort of vague, fuzzy sound—pulls away from her, Sakura yelps, “Hey!” Her hands reach for his, grabbing.



“Sakura.” She looks at him, finally, eyebrows slightly drawn in frustration.

“What?”

“My brother wants to meet you.”

For a second, the glare remains. Then, slowly, Sakura grins. “Really?” Her hand reaches out and squeezes Sasuke’s. “Does he really?”

Hesitantly, Sasuke nods and wonders how, exactly, to go about this. “Yes... But, Sakura, you should know—Itachi is... Well...”

“A jerk? Cold? Aloof?” She sticks her tongue out. “Like you?”

Fixing her with a hard, annoyed stare, Sasuke shakes his head. “He has extremely high standards, for himself and for everyone.” He wonders if Sakura will understand. When her smile fades, he knows she has. She stops, suddenly, and turns to face Sasuke.

“Wait a minute!” Her mouth has turned down, and one hand has found her hip, the other pointing at Sasuke. “Are you saying that I’m not good enough for you?”

Sighing, Sasuke grabs her pointing hand and continues to walk towards his car. Her weight won’t budge, so he turns back to her stubborn, glaring face. “No, Sakura. I am not saying that.”

She takes a single step.

“I just wanted to warn you, before you meet him, because I don’t want you to be... offended. Or hurt. Or upset.”

Another slow, halting step.

“He might like you, though. You’re capable of being polite. You’re smart. And—and you’re pretty enough.”

And Sakura is right beside him, hand squeezing his and lips brushing over his cheek, voice right next to his ear as she says, “Oh, Sasuke. Don’t you worry with your pretty little head. Itachi will like me just fine.”

On Friday, before Itachi leaves for work, Sasuke tells him that Sakura will be coming over that evening, before she and Sasuke go out for dinner. Itachi nods and straightens his tie before poking Sasuke in the forehead and says, “I’m looking forward to it, otouto.”

The whole day, Sasuke frets.

In class, he pays only half-attention. When he returns home, he finds that he has typed the same sentence twice on an important essay.



Itachi has rules. Sakura's pink hair will probably break a few. If she wears a outfit that is either bizarre or revealing (and Sasuke knows with despair that it's a very real possibility), it will cost her. God forbid she opens her mouth and starts spewing her random nonsense. Because if she does, if she fails to be perfect in anyway, Itachi will be unhappy, dissatisfied with Sasuke's decisions. And that will lead to a serious talk, one that involves a whole lot of as-your-older-brother-and-guardian-I-only-want-what's-best-for-you's, and even more in-my-opinion's, and finally, a big, fat I-am-unsure-this-person-is-a-healthy-addition-to-your-life.

Sasuke had defied Itachi once.

He has a stupid, ramen-eating idiot of a best friend to prove it.

It still makes his stomach twitch to think of doing it again.

Finally, Sasuke can take it no longer. When he hears Itachi's car pull up, he slinks upstairs and hopes the shower will calm his ridiculously high-strung nerves.

Itachi is waiting for the water to boil for his tea when he hears a faint buzzing.

He turns. On the counter, vibrating on top of the flat table of the surface and blinking red, is Sasuke's cell phone. One long stride later, and Itachi is picking it up, bringing it to his face and waiting for his eyes to focus on the tiny screen.

One new message. Huh.

Itachi flips the phone open.

There is one new text message. He reads it.

Eyes narrowing in distaste, Itachi looks to see who the idiotic message is from.

Sakura

He glares at the phone and returns to his now-boiling water.

Sasuke opens the door before Sakura knocks.

"Hi," she says, smile only slightly strained and eyes flicking over his shoulder.

"Hi." Sasuke manages a smile back at Sakura, whose hair is neat, whose teeth are clean, whose clothes are nice and normal.

They turn around, Sasuke grabs Sakura's hand, and Itachi is there.

"You must be Sakura." He does not even attempt a smile, and there is a definite air of superiority in the way his arms cross over his chest. Sakura's smile wavers, and her eyebrows draw together slightly. But her voice is still bright as she answers.



“Yes!” A small hand sticks out, nails bright green, only to be engulfed in Itachi’s larger, much less colorful hand. Sasuke sees the tendons jump and knows his brother is purposely squeezing too tightly. Sakura does not flinch. “Itachi! I’m glad to meet you.”

“How long have you known Sasuke?”

Sakura’s eyes widen and flicker briefly to Sasuke.

“Well, we went to the same high school, but—”

“How long have you been dating?”

“Um, well, I guess we’ve been dating for about four months, but we’ve only—”

“What is your major?”

Anger is beginning to cloud over Sakura’s surprise now, and there is a more and more prominent downward-twist in her lips as she speaks, her voice not so smooth and sweet. “A pre-med.”

“And you want—”

“To be a doctor, yes.”

She cut him off, says a far-off voice in Sasuke’s head. Oh no.

For a second, he wonders if Sakura feels the sudden chill in the room, the tension so thick that Sasuke literally twitches with the need to go outside. But, apparently, she does not. Her shoulders have come up, squared to match her upward thrust chin and defiantly crossed arms. The glare she angles Itachi is only surpassed by the one he shoots her.

And then, Itachi is smiling, and Sasuke is afraid, and Sakura’s eyes are narrowing.

“One last thing.”

“What?”

“Would you consider yourself a heavy drinker or merely an alcoholic?”

“What?” asks Sakura, Sasuke’s voice an incredulous echo.

“I read the text message you sent Sasuke. And I must say—I was shocked at the crudeness. Very unbecoming.”

“What?” This time, only Sasuke speaks, phone already in hand, flipping to his inbox and—and suddenly wanting nothing more than to bang his head against the nearest available wall.

baby, will you be my corona and lime? cuz i will be your main squeeze :)



“Damn,” he whispers.

“Excuse me?” Sasuke looks up to Sakura, fists clenching, voice rising with each word. “I didn’t send you that text! You had no right to even read it.”

Yeah, agrees Sasuke, scowling at Itachi.

“I have every right.” Itachi steps closer to Sakura, towers over her, and Sasuke finds himself stepping between the two of them. But then, Sakura is pushing him aside, pointing at Itachi and saying: “Well, you certainly have no right to judge me based on a message you missed the context of!”

“Context would not make that idiotic, trashy message seem any less repulsive.”

“Let me tell you—”

“No, I’ll tell you, girl, I do not want Sasuke—”

Sasuke grabs Sakura around the waist then, because her fist is about to swing into his brother’s face. He pulls back, and she is making an odd hissing, growling noise.

“You can’t tell Sasuke what to do!”

“I can.” Itachi turns to Sasuke. “And I will.”

Still enclosed in the loop of his arms, Sakura stiffens. Sasuke lets out a long, slow sigh. Itachi smiles as his arms fall away.

“Sakura, go get in the car.” He glares at Itachi. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

And Sakura is smiling, wide and triumphant, leaning up and kissing him on the cheek with a glare in Itachi’s direction. As she turns, she speaks over her shoulder.

“You know, it’s funny, because I don’t even drink. Ever heard of myelin, Itachi? That stuff in you brain? Did you know alcohol is toxic to it?” She reaches the door and yanks it open. “No? But, hey, you’ve obviously never heard of a pick-up line either. Go figure.”

With a loud slam, she is gone.

Itachi looks at where she had been only seconds ago, with a strange expression on his face. Sasuke snarls and stalks over to grab his keys and wallet.

“You’re a bastard,” he says, stomping to the door. “I’ll be back later.”

“Sasuke.”

Sasuke turns to face Itachi, scowling as he does, angry at his stupid brother, and his stupid ego, and the stupid way he now has to go out with a stupid, angry Sakura. “What do you want, Itachi?”

The smile on Itachi’s face—calm, cool, plotting—worries Sasuke. “What?”



“Does Sakura sleep on her stomach?” he asks, as though it’s the most normal thing in the world. Sasuke’s jaw slackens.

“Wha—What?”

“I asked you whether or not Sakura,” he gestures towards the door, “sleeps on her stomach.”

Voice rising, angry at Itachi for explaining and yet telling him nothing at all, Sasuke growls, “How the hell would I know?”

“Well, ask her.”

“Why?”

“Because after you do, you ask her if you can.”

For a heartbeat, Sasuke doesn’t know what in the world is going on. Itachi seems to sense this, because his smile widens and he reiterates, “Ask her if you can sleep on her stomach.”

Sasuke comes very, very close to throwing a temper tantrum right there.

Instead, he spins on his heel, stomps through the door, slams it on Itachi’s growing laughter, and hopes that Sakura will not question the brilliant red of his face.

Flights of Fancy

The clouds were nice, and fluffy, and cute. And Sakura found that watching them was quite relaxing; in fact, it was fun, and very pleasing.

But the novelty of cloud watching waned after the first few minutes or so (she was no Shikamaru). And pretty soon, the clouds just became—well—*boring*. Looking for shapes and formations didn’t help either, because really, for a not-so-creative girl like Sakura, all the clouds looked painfully like—well—clouds.

So she turned her attention to something more tangible, like in-flight magazines.

Now in-flight magazines, these could provide entertainment for at least an hour. But they all have this sneaky aura—as if they were put there just to force bored people to read countless ads, like subtle brainwashing instruments. So Sakura always felt a bit betrayed when she read them. Besides, these magazines only have 20 pages or so—you’d be lucky to find one with 50—and only half of the pages were interesting, the other half, not so.





So when Sakura realized that she was reading articles like “How to Floss your Teeth” or “Top 10 New Innovations on Teeth Whitening”, she knew that the magazine had outlived its usefulness.

Cursing—not for the first time—that the love of her life disowned his homeland and chose to live in posh New York, and wishing that the flight from Tokyo to New York



would last for just an hour instead of thirteen, she turned her attention to something else, or rather, someone else.

“Hey,” she said, in the friendliest voice she could muster.

The male—25-ish, with long black hair tied in a low ponytail; he was excessively pretty in a masculine-but-almost-feminine way—looked at her with an annoyed expression for a moment before his features smoothed out to one of practiced disinterest.

“Hello,” he said politely in a silky deep voice, before he turned his attention back to reading a thick paperback.

Sakura, not one to be deterred easily, made another attempt to strike up a conversation.

“*Sophie’s World*, I’ve read that book. It’s wonderful.”

The man merely gave a small nod of acknowledgement and went back to ignoring her.

“Turns out,” she continued, nodding sagely, “that they—Sophie and Alberto—were just characters in a book that the Major was writing as a birthday gift for his daughter, Hilde, which explains the postcards, really, and—”

The man, who seemed engrossed in the book just a few minutes earlier, now looked at her with an expression of disbelief that might have looked comical, had Sakura not been so mortified at her slip.

“I-I’m sorry.” She blushed, deeply embarrassed.

The man kept on staring/glaring at her,

“I’m just so bored, and I forgot to bring a book, see, and—”

“So you thought it would be fun to ruin someone else’s reading experience?”

“Yes-No-No, of course not. I was just trying to strike up a conversation, that’s all.”

He looked as if he was contemplating either murder or a request to move to another seat. And after a few long seconds of terse silence, he closed the book, put it on his lap, and said, “So speak.”

Sakura, who didn’t know what to make of this new development, could only acquiesce.

“Um, hi, I’m Sakura. What’s your name?” Lamé—but it was all she could do under such pressure.

“You may call me,” the man seemed to think for a while, then finally said, “seatmate.”



“Well, uh, seatmate, why are you going to go to the United States?”

“I plan to visit my brother, you?”

“I plan to visit someone too,” she began, slightly more comfortable now that the conversation had taken off. “He’s my...” She stopped, fumbling at the next word. “Friend.”

“Really?” the man asked, one finely shaped brow raised. “Sounds to me like you don’t want him to be.”

Sakura looked at the stranger for a while before deciding to throw caution to the wind.

“Well, I probably won’t ever see you again for the rest of my life, seatmate, and I’ve already embarrassed myself in front of you—and spoiled your book in the process—so I guess it wouldn’t do any harm.” She smiled. “I don’t—just want him to be a friend, that is. I want him to be something more, but it seems like that’s never going to happen.”

“Does he know about your feelings?”

“Yes and no. I told him once, when we were thirteen. And I meant it, truly I did. But I don’t know if he took it seriously. Anyway, he left and I didn’t see him again for five years. It wasn’t easy, especially since he never even tried to contact me or any of our friends. But we met just a few years ago and patched things up. We’re friends now, I think. But the subject of that confession was never brought up.”

“Your story sounds so cliché.”

“Hey, I resent that. Besides, it’s not quite as ‘typical’ as you may believe. You see, we will probably end up married someday. Only, it’s just going to be one of convenience rather than true love. There won’t be any of that going-down-on-one-knee-and-presenting-a-diamond-ring business.”

She sighed.

“He’s going to marry me because he doesn’t know any other girl.”

“Why, is he ugly?”

“No, goodness no. Quite the opposite, really.”

“Then, is he gay?”

“Mm...I’ve wondered about that. But, no. Asexual, maybe, but definitely not gay. I have it on good authority.”

“Then why do you think he’ll marry you if he doesn’t love you?”

Sakura winced at the man’s bluntness, but decided to plow on, “He does love me, just...not in that way. A mutual friend of ours told me that Sas-Bob, *Bob* considers me as one of his ‘precious people’, which is probably the closest I’ll get to an acknowledgment.”



“Don’t you think he’ll marry someone else, someone he loves in a romantic way?”

“You know,” she said after a few seconds of thinking, “I waited in trepidation during my whole teenage life for him to fall in love with another woman. I kept on thinking that it was just me whom he couldn’t fall in love with. He was extremely focused on his goals, you see, and I couldn’t distract him no matter how hard I tried. And one day—it was inevitable—he just upped and left our town. Next thing I knew, he transferred to a different school and he’s hanging out with a new posse, along with this red-haired girl. I was practically shaking in my boots. I thought he was in love with the tra—er-girl. But it was a fluke. Turns out, it was all part of his stupid master plan—the success of which is still debatable. Sas-Bob’s stupid like that, which is odd because he practically has a genius-level IQ. EQ’s shit though.”

“So why do you think he’ll get married at all?”

“Because it’s all part of his goal, he said so himself.”

“His goal?”

“Yes, finding a willing uterus and breeding like a bunny.”

“And you’ll allow yourself to be used like that?”

Sakura shrugged.

“I love him,” she said simply.

“You shouldn’t,” he said.

Sakura averted her eyes and looked outside the window, staring at the clouds once more. Both sat in an awkward silence, neither of them knowing what to say. Then Sakura, getting bored again, quipped, “So, how about you? I’ve told you all about my love life, but you haven’t shared a single word about yours.”

It was his turn to shrug. “It’s nonexistent.”

“Why? You seem like quite a catch, girls should be flocking to you.”

“They do,” he said, but without a trace of pride. “However, I’m too busy with work.”

“Ah. Married to the desk, eh?”

“You can say that.”

“You were reading Sophie’s World—sorry about that, by the way—does that mean you’re into philosophy?”

The man nodded.

“Who do you think got it right?”

“Nietzsche.”



“Are you kidding? That guy’s harsh!”

“No. I’m not. You see enough of life and you’ll see the point in what he says.”

“I do see enough of life. I work at a hospital. Depressing place, if you ask me.” She twirled a lock of pink hair on her finger, thinking deep. “But I don’t believe in Nietzsche. I liked Kant’s philosophy a lot more. Universal Law and all that.”

“You’re naïve, I think—”

Twelve hours later—two of which were spent on philosophy, three on medicine, one on plastic spoons, three on books, one on her deepest, darkest secrets, one on embarrassingly-placed birthmarks, and one on spark plugs—they arrived at their destination.

“Well, seatmate, I suppose this is goodbye,” said Sakura, glancing at the airport terminal through her window.

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“It was fun talking to you, but you know way too many of my secret—more than anyone else, in fact—and I’d much rather not see you ever again. No offense.”

The man nodded, turning his focus to his bag, and Sakura did the same.

Thirty minutes later, Sakura was on a bus feeling just a little bit dizzy, when the very same man got on.

Sakura smiled in recognition and waved at him, indicating the empty seat beside her. He, too, smiled and walked over to her.

“Well, seatmate,” she began, “apparently, it’s not yet time for us to part. So let’s pick up where we left off. Now what was I saying? Oh yeah, spark plugs—”

Another hour of spark plugs later, Sakura had arrived at her stop.

“Here’s my stop. Bye seatmate. It was really nice talking to you.”

Excited to see her friend/love, she turned and walked to the bus door.

Her suitcase was heavy and she heaved it along with great difficulty. So it surprised her immensely when the weight was eased quite abruptly. Confused, she looked at her suitcase only to see someone else’s hand on the handle bars. She glanced up to see her seatmate sporting an amused expression.

“Oh, hmm, thanks for helping me, seatmate,” she said when she got off the bus. “But shouldn’t you be getting back now? The bus might leave without you.”

She took her suitcase back and said her goodbyes, but he didn’t return them.

“Look, you don’t seem like the psycho-type at all, so may I just ask why you’re following me around?”

“I’m not.”



Sakura left it at that and looked at the paper which held Sasuke's address and then looked around at the signs on the surrounding houses. Number 4—this was it.

She walked up to the porch.

"Hey, seatmate, don't think I don't know what you're doing," she said, narrowing her eyes. "As soon as you've satisfied your curiosity about the guy I was talking about, can you please, *please*, just leave already?"

When he did nothing but smile at her in an annoyingly patronizing way, she asked.

"Is it money you want? If it is, then I'll have you know that I'm not intimidated easily. I am immune to extortion."

Saying that, Sakura reached up and rang the doorbell. Sakura glared at her seatmate for good measure and faced the door, putting on her best smile. It didn't take long before the door was thrown open.

"Sakura," greeted Sasuke with a small nod in her direction.

Then, noticing her companion, his eyes narrowed into slits and he said, "Brother?"

She was—there was no other word for it—*mortified*. She wished that a meteor would just fall right then and there and crush her to bits or the earth would fall out of its axis and hurtle towards the sun.

She was speechless. She was frozen.

"Little brother, Sasuke. I didn't know that you and my fiancée were acquainted. What a pleasant surprise."

Numbly, she felt an arm snake around her back and rest upon her shoulders.

"Fiancée? Sakura, Itachi, you—"

"Well, Sasuke, are you just going to stand there or are you going to let us in?"

"Wha-of, of course, brother, forgive my manners," said Sasuke, stepping back. "Please come in."

Sakura, who was just recovering from the shock and was spiraling head first into another one, felt a tug and, having nothing else to do, mutely followed Itachi inside the house.

Her brain was just barely registering the word 'fiancée' when Itachi leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Play along or I'll spill your secrets. Consider this as my revenge for Sophie's World."

Powerless, Sakura thought grimly that her life was over.



“So,” Sasuke began, with an air of an interrogator who could turn torturer at any minute, “how exactly did you two meet?”

He directed the question at Sakura, but it was Itachi who answered.

“We met at a medical conference. I found her infinitely charming, so I asked her out,” said Itachi, lying with the fluidity of oil.

Sakura was no stranger to lying—but that didn’t mean that she could do it convincingly, especially to Sasuke, so she kept her head bowed down.

“My sweet dumpling here,” he said, putting his arm around Sakura again, “turned out to be such a great conversationalist that we immediately hit it off. Did you know, Sasuke, that Sakura here is a wiz in Philosophy and in car fixes? No, I suppose you didn’t. And we have the same taste in literature, imagine that! Anyway, we were enjoying ourselves so much that—well, Sasuke, let’s just say that I wasted no time in founding out about that delectable mole on her—”

“Itachi!” She screamed, turning beet red. Sasuke, on the opposite side of the table, was making a very good impression of a prune dipped in acid.

Itachi chuckled, and looked as if he was about to say something else, when his phone rang.

“Please excuse me; I have to take this call.”

And all of a sudden, Sasuke and Sakura were alone in the dining room. The tension was so thick that it was almost suffocating. Sakura wished that Sasuke would speak, say something, anything.

But when her plea was granted, she couldn’t help but wish that he kept silent instead.

“You never stop, do you, Sakura?”

Sakura opened her mouth to speak but Sasuke wouldn’t let her.

“What are you after? What do you want? Just say it. Are you trying to get to me through my brother? What? Is this some kind of sick revenge for what I put you through?”

“What—no! Sasuke, I didn’t even know he was your brother!”

“Tch! Do you take me for a fool?”

“It’s true, I—”

“You’d think his surname wasn’t a damn giveaway!”

“I—”



Sakura, reminded of Itachi's little farce, found that she really couldn't say anything. So she closed her mouth, pressed her lips together tightly, and looked straight at Sasuke, who stared right back, unblinking.

It seemed like their little contest would never end. Then, thanking God for small mercies, Sakura heard Itachi enter the door.

"Little brother, I have some urgent business to attend to. I trust that you'll take care of Sakura for me while I'm gone. I'll be back by 6." Then, turning to Sakura, he said, "Bye my sweet dumpling."

Okay—so maybe it wasn't a 'small mercy' after all. Cursing her fate, Sakura wondered if Sasuke would pick up where he left off and continue berating her. She was already close to tears as it was. She didn't think she could take much more.

"If you don't mind, Sasuke, I'll go up to my room."

Turning abruptly, she ran out of the dining room and into the guest room, locking herself in.

That night, Sakura was already getting ready for sleep when she heard a knock on her door. Her head was swimming with thoughts about Sasuke and how his words cut deep. She also played her conversation with Itachi on the plane in her head over and over again—like a track on replay.

Warily, she walked over and opened it a crack.

"Sorry, I'm late. Open up?"

After a moment's hesitation, Sakura opened the door completely and said, "We're not sleeping in the same room."

"Of course not—not until the honeymoon, sweet dump—hey, have you been crying?"

"No." She sighed. "Yes. Your brother's a jerk."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really, no."

"Ice cream, then?"

Sakura's face lit up as she saw the package that Itachi was holding up.

"You, seatmate, are a god-send. Come on in."

They went to the balcony and sat on the elaborate rattan chairs. Sakura, commandeering the ice cream, ate a spoonful and looked up at the stars.

"Itachi, what you said before, on the plane..."



“Hmm?”

“You said I shouldn’t love him. Why?”

“That was before I knew you were talking about my brother.”

“Oh.”

“So now, you’re saying that I should?”

Itachi shrugged, then said, “Up to you.”

Sakura sighed, hugging her knees closer to her to ward off the chilly night air. She marveled at how comfortable silence could be with Itachi, a stark contrast to how stifling it was with Sasuke. The two brothers were so different. Itachi was like a—she couldn’t find any other word for it—a ribbon. He was relaxed, and elegant, and always pleasant; while Sasuke, Sasuke was like a coiled spring that was waiting to snap.

“Itachi?”

“Hmm?”

“Was he always like that, I mean, was he always so…”

“Mean?”

Sakura nodded, and shifted in her seat to get a better view of Itachi while he spoke.

“He was a sweet kid back then,” Itachi began, talking in that whimsical but sad tone that people use when they reminisce about lost childhoods. “He was very talkative, and a bit annoying, but in an adorable way. He was always eager to please, especially when it came to father.”

Itachi chuckled, sounding as if his thoughts were far away.

“He changed, though, when our parents died. Our uncle betrayed our father and took over the company. Father was beset with grief. Mother tried to help him but…” Itachi sighed, he looked wearier than she had ever seen him. “She was uncle’s sister, and father resented her. Eventually their marriage started failing. She went out one night, after a particularly nasty fight, it was—she got into an accident. Father’s condition worsened after that and he just stopped eating, and he lashed out at Sasuke far too often. I suspect it was because he looked a lot like our mother. But, eventually, father’s health started failing too. I was in college when it all happened, here in America. Sasuke was the only one at home. He was the one who found father dead in his bed one morning. He just—he just sort of closed up after that, and I haven’t seen his playful side ever since.”

He paused for a while, looking contemplatively up at the stars, before he glanced back at Sakura and continued.

“Next thing I know, he’s head of the company again, and our uncle’s in prison. I don’t really know how he did it, especially since he was barely out of his teenage years



back then. It's an amazing achievement. But he managed. He sacrificed a lot, though. When we saw each other again, I almost couldn't recognize him. He was embittered, wouldn't laugh, wouldn't joke, wouldn't play, possessed such a sharp tongue, and he was always so grave, like the world was sitting on his shoulders—I still wish I could've done more to shield him from that.”

Itachi took the ice cream from Sakura then, and smiled, a charming, beguiling smile.

“Well, sweet dumpling, time for me to go. You better get some beauty sleep. I'm taking you dancing tomorrow. Charity ball.”

Then, just as he was about to leave, Itachi turned to Sakura and spoke.

“Sakura, don't take my little brother's hateful words seriously. He's rash and lets his mouth run off when he's confused. He often says things out of anger, though he doesn't mean them. He's not quite as refined as his big brother.”

Sakura giggled and waited for Itachi to leave her room before leaning back on her chair and looking back at the stars, smiling contentedly. She may not have believed him completely about how Sasuke didn't mean what he said but she was happy with his concern.

Then, realizing that her hands were empty, she muttered a small expletive. Itachi took the ice cream with him.

Sasuke usually didn't leave his house in the evenings, but the new developments had made his house feel stifling, and he felt a big urge to get some fresh air.

He went to the garden and sat underneath the shadow of a large tree, shielding himself from the sickly light of the lamppost. He rested his hands on his knees and closed his eyes, trying to enter a more tranquil state through meditation.

Just when he was about to manage, though, he heard the sound of a door opening. On impulse, he looked up and followed the sound.

Immediately, he regretted it.

Sakura was accompanied by his brother on the balcony and they both sat down on the chairs, looking completely at ease with each other.

Sasuke tried to look away, to give them their privacy, but he simply couldn't.

They were conversing about something but the wind blew in the other direction and it didn't carry their words to him. Still, it didn't matter; Sasuke told himself that he didn't care, not in the least. He told himself that Sakura and Itachi were both grownups, and he didn't have the right to stop them from doing anything.

But Sasuke never did believe in himself.



When he saw them sharing a spoon, he couldn't keep himself from cringing.

He told himself that he was disgusted with how unsanitary the swapping of saliva through shared utensils was. Again, he failed to make himself believe. But at least the lies made things easier to bear.

Then, he heard her giggle, her voice sounding like bells in the cold night air, and for the life of him, he could not think of a single lie to tell himself.

Just when Sakura was starting to think that Itachi was her friend, he did something extremely traitorous.

There she was, wearing an elegant black dress, all dolled-up for an evening of dancing—looking forward to it, too—and all the weasel could say was, “Sorry, dumpling, something important turned up. I’ll leave you with Sasuke for now, okay? He’ll be your escort.”

Then, to an irate Sasuke, he said, “Don’t try anything funny. Hands on her waist, no going any lower.”

And then, before he left, Itachi even had the nerve to steal her first forehead kiss! She was hoping that Sasuke would be her first forehead kiss, but nooo—

“Well, are you ready?”

Jolted out of her internal ranting by Sasuke’s gruff voice, Sakura blushed and took the hand that he offered her.

Throughout the ride to the dance hall, neither of them said anything to each other, both lost in their own thoughts.

Sasuke, on his part, was trying to resist the urge to glance at Sakura.

Sakura, on the other hand, was mustering the courage to talk to Sasuke.

A few more minutes were spent in silence. Then—

“Sasuke, I—”

“We’re here. Get ready.”

Sakura, dismayed at the fact that Sasuke obviously didn’t want to talk, ironed the non-existent wrinkles out of her dress and sighed.

Later, when they were in the ballroom, their hands intertwined as they danced a slow waltz to the tune of Tony Bennett’s “The Way you Look Tonight”, Sasuke inhaled her scent, breathing in the memory of this one perfect night they had. He felt safe at the thought that his true emotions were adequately shielded by a sense of duty; that he could convince himself that he was dancing with her because he *had* to, and not because he wanted to. It would be one of those moments that he would keep in his mind forever,



immortalized in bittersweet sepia, filed away for the darker days when nothing in the world seemed right.

Sakura—she felt right in his arms, and Sasuke thought grimly that, after she and Itachi got married, never would she feel ‘right’ for him ever again.

A sense of betrayal had bubbled up in his throat and when the song ended, he had worked himself up into a bad mood. An ache had settled in him, not just in his heart, but in his head, and in his stomach—everywhere.

It was a pain that came from deep inside, deeper than flesh and muscles and blood.

Then, unable to take a moment more in Sakura’s presence, Sasuke stalked away and left her in the middle of the ballroom floor, looking lost but resplendent amidst the sea of dancing couples.

He would never, not in his life, find out that he left her in tears that day.

As if Sakura wasn’t miserable enough, Naruto arrived the following day.

Normally, she would’ve been overjoyed to see the blond but upon seeing the said boy’s expression when he learned of Sakura and Itachi’s ‘engagement’, Sakura merely wished that she was somewhere far, far away.

And to make matters worse, she had not seen Sasuke since the dance. She was still bitter about the fact that he left her there. She surely couldn’t take the bus home wearing that fancy dress of hers. She had to find someone in the hall who knew Itachi’s number—it was embarrassing, but what else could she do? Then, she called Itachi and asked him, in a teary, shaky voice, to come pick her up.

They had some more ice cream after that.

Really, he was a sweet guy and he seemed like a more-than-decent fake fiancé, but it was obvious that Itachi was taking the farce too far.

And when Naruto approached her to ‘talk’, she just knew that things had spun out of control.

“Sakura-chan, can we talk?”

“Yeah, Naruto?”

“It’s about your engagement with Itachi.”

Sakura bit her lip and wondered whether or not she should tell Naruto.

“You can’t do this.”

Annoyed that Naruto, who was a *can-guy* through and through, actually had the nerve to tell her that she ‘can’t’ do something, Sakura snapped.



“Why not!”

“Because—Sakura-chan, don’t get mad. Just hear me out.”

Sakura made an effort to smooth the angry expression out of her face, but it was difficult.

When Naruto spoke, his voice was low and serious.

“Do you... do you know why...” Naruto sighed and closed his eyes. “Do you know why I gave up on you all those years ago?”

When Sakura didn’t answer, Naruto plowed on.

“It’s because I saw how much you meant to him. No offense, Sakura-chan, you’re pretty and you’re nice and more than a guy can dream of and all—but, Sasuke and his feelings for you, well I couldn’t top that. And I highly doubt that any guy can. You know that Sasuke’s messed up. He doesn’t show it, but he’s as needy as they come. He does love you and he needs you. His heart may be three sizes too small, but he loves you with all of it. You’re just too blind to see it.”

“There’s nothing to see, Naruto. Sasuke obviously doesn’t care about me that way.”

“You have to admit that he’s not taking your engagement to his brother very well.”

“That’s because he thinks I’m trying to get back at him through his brother.”

Sakura could feel herself tearing up again at Sasuke’s gross miscalculation of her character. It hurt a lot to know that, after all her efforts at getting him to acknowledge her, Sasuke still thought badly of her.

Naruto merely shook his head and said, “He loves you, Sakura-chan.”

“Is this,” she bit out, tears falling in earnest now, “how love is supposed to feel Naruto? Is it supposed to be heavy and painful and agonizing? Do people who love you constantly walk away and leave you hanging? What am I supposed to do, Naruto? Wait? Am I supposed to wait for him? I’m sick of this! I’m sick and tired of being taken for granted.”

“Sakura?”

“And you know, Naruto—I—what?”

“Sakura, can I ask you one thing? Just one thing.”

Sakura eyed her friend warily and said, “Go ahead.”

“Do you love him?”

“I—”

“Just answer the question Sakura.”



Defeated, she bowed her head and whispered, “So much, Naruto... I love him so much.”

“That’s all I needed to know.”

Then, flashing Sakura an enthusiastic thumbs-up and a bright smile, Naruto ran out of the room and was gone.

“Oi Itachi.”

“Yes, Naruto?”

Itachi looked up from his desk and eyed Naruto warily.

“Do you love Sakura?”

Itachi seemed to think for a moment before saying bluntly, “No.”

“Then why the hell are you marrying her?” asked Naruto, angry now. “You know that what you’re doing is hurting both Sasuke and Sakura, right?”

“I’m not.”

“What?”

Now Naruto was just confused.

“I’m not marrying her.”

“What do you mean?”

He eyed Itachi suspiciously, but really, Naruto was just bewildered. Things were far simpler a week ago.

“It’s a farce.”

“What?”

“The engagement is a farce.”

“What!”

“We’re just pretending.”

“And Sakura-chan’s playing along? Impossible! It isn’t like her to lie to us deliberately.” Naruto’s eyes turned to slits, angry. “What did you do?”

“I blackmailed her.”

“Bastard! I’ll end this now, I’ll tell—”

“Trust me, Naruto. This is all for the best. I’m teaching both of them a lesson.”

Then, seeing that the blond was not quite convinced, Itachi sighed.



“You know I’d do anything for my brother.”

Naruto gave a small nod. He had no choice but to agree to that. Itachi did, and would, do anything for Sasuke.

“Then trust me.”

Naruto did. But it wouldn’t hurt if he sped up the learning process a bit.

When Naruto found Sasuke, the guy was still wearing the tuxedo from the night before. He looked disheveled, with his clothes wrinkled and his eyes surrounded by dark rims. It was obvious that Sasuke didn’t get any sleep.

“Bastard!” he called.

Naruto was expecting the usual retort of “Stupid”, but nothing came. Worried now, Naruto ran up to Sasuke and gave him a light shove.

“Oi Sasuke.”

“Go away, Naruto.”

Sasuke’s voice was tired, hoarse, but it had a steely and intimidating edge that made Naruto want to acquiesce. But of course, he was Naruto, and he was a man on a mission.

“Tell me, honestly, that you don’t love Sakura-chan and I’ll go away.”

Sasuke glared at Naruto, but otherwise said nothing.

“You should stop the wedding,” suggested Naruto, as if stopping a wedding was something as simple as watching the weather channel.

“What’s the point?”

“Sakura loves you.”

“Sakura,” he spat, saying Sakura’s name like it was a curse word, “is marrying my brother.”

“She won’t be happy with Itachi.”

“Are you kidding, Naruto? Itachi makes her happy. He knows her favorite ice cream, her hobbies, her moles, her—he knows *her*, Naruto. I’ve seen him do more for Sakura in these past few days than I have in a lifetime.”

Sasuke paused, and Naruto thought that he had never seen Sasuke look this old, this weary, before. It was as if the boy’s very soul was taken and ripped apart. Or maybe he just looked like someone with a nasty hangover. Naruto didn’t fail to notice the empty beer cans littering the floor.

Naruto was about to retort, but Sasuke spoke up.



“I don’t deserve her Naruto. I never have, and I never will.”

“She loves you,” Naruto reiterated. But even to himself, his words felt weak.

Sasuke grew quiet after that, and Naruto knew that there was nothing more that he could glean from their conversation. There was nothing else he could do without making matters worse.

There was nothing to do now but wait.

He just hoped that Sasuke wouldn’t do anything rash, that he’d come to his senses. He also hoped that Itachi knew exactly what he was doing.

Life was nice for Sakura and she would’ve enjoyed herself immensely, visiting museums, art galleries, and going to various formal parties, had she not been nursing a little heartache.

Itachi was a wonderful companion. He was polite, sweet, and he was a wonderfully graceful dancer—better than her, in fact. He also lavished her with attention—something a certain somebody never did—and it felt very nice. It was enough to make her forgive him—a little—for blackmailing her.

But he was not Sasuke, and that left a large hole in Sakura’s heart.

Still, Itachi was well acquainted with several important people, and that assured her that she would always be entertained.

Once, they spent several hours in the mansion of a large Japanese man, Hoshigaki Kisame, who was extremely interested in marine biology. Sakura mused that his interests had severely influenced everything in Mr. Hoshigaki’s life, as he not only devoted his entire time on fishes, he also looked a bit like them too. She pointed this out to Itachi and he merely chuckled good-naturedly at her observations and gave her a few more interesting tidbits about the amiable scientist.

They had lunch with Mr. Hoshigaki and his apprentice, Hozuki Suigetsu, who was also interested in marine biology, but was more fascinated with ancient swords. He even offered to show Sakura his collection, particularly his largest ‘sword’. Sakura, unsure whether she had heard an innuendo or not, was saved from replying when Itachi interjected and told Suigetsu that she was already engaged and was about to become Uchiha Sakura soon.

Sakura had heard no more suggestive comments after that.

However, she wished he didn’t go about spreading their little lie, as she would have a lot of explaining to do when their engagement turned out to be false. She was glad, however, that he didn’t call her sweet dumpling in front of anyone else but Sasuke. Still, when they were alone, Sakura didn’t neglect to tell Itachi to stop calling her a “future Uchiha” because, she said bitterly, though her chances were high before, Sasuke



was furious at her now and her position in the list of willing uteruses was undoubtedly lowered a few notches.

Sakura thought that he would acquiesce. But when they were at a dinner party with some more of his friends, Nagato and Konan, a very nice and affectionately sweet couple, Itachi once again called her a future Uchiha. She pinched him underneath the table, but he was relentless, and emphasized his point once again.

Sakura sighed, resigned to her fate and knowing that nothing she did or said would stop Itachi from doing what he wanted. Itachi wasn't so different from Sasuke in that aspect.

Sasuke, she thought sadly, was still missing. She had asked Itachi if he had seen him, but Itachi merely assured her that Sasuke was safe and that she shouldn't worry.

"So, Sakura, Itachi told me that you're an apprentice of the lady Tsunade."

Sakura, lost in her own thoughts about the dark-haired broody-boy, didn't notice that their companion had asked her a question until Itachi cleared his throat loudly and spoke.

"Yes, Zetsu, Sakura's quite talented, in fact—"

Zetsu, a botanist who, oddly, claimed that he didn't 'do' surnames, seemed annoyed at Itachi for butting into the conversation and directed another question at Sakura.

"So, you're interested in medicinal herbs like your mentor, yes?"

Sakura found Zetsu slightly creepy, as his personality sometimes did a 360° at unguarded moments (Sakura conveniently ignored the fact that they were similar in that respect), but politeness required her to give an answer.

"Yes, in fact, we're currently doing some research on the effectiveness of herbal remedies compared to that of artificial ones when it comes to hypertension. The results are promising and—"

"In that case, would you like to see my greenhouse? I have an excellent display of medicinal plants and—"

"Maybe some other time, Zetsu, Sakura and I still have to visit Sasori and Deidara's art galleries later today and I still have some business to discuss with Hidan and Kakuzu."

Zetsu sniffed disdainfully and said, "Suit yourselves. I don't understand why people would want to see those horrendous displays. Art is simply not a matter of consequence, far less useful than botany and—"

"Be that as it may, Zetsu, we've made an appointment and it would be impolite of us to break it.



Sakura was disappointed; she truly was interested in medicinal plants. Zetsu assured her that she was more than welcome to come back (and left her with an odd comment about holding on to her wallet when they visit Kakuzu) and she promised him that she would try her best to do so.

When she told Itachi about what she wanted later in the car, he told her that he found the prospect of discussing *Glecoma Heredacea*—which was really just a fancy name for a weed—and other itchy green things with Zetsu utterly boring, as the man could go on for hours. But still, he promised that he would take her there again if she really wanted, and that he would throw in a bouquet of *Rosa Berberifolia* into the deal.

Sakura smiled, impressed at Itachi's knowledge of plants, though he feigned indifference. But she was more impressed with his easy charm, a trait that Sasuke, handsome as he was, lacked completely.

Really, Sakura thought that she probably wasn't right in the head when she fell in love with Sasuke, devoid of charm as he was. But she was in love with him, undeniable so, and it wasn't something she could undo, no matter how much she wished otherwise.

As Sakura was traipsing about the city in fancy dresses and getting acquainted with fancy people, Sasuke was wearing shabby shirts and getting acquainted with the wine bottle.

His carefully laid out plans, as he saw them, were in ruins. He was supposed to be married by next year, had even picked out an engagement ring, but Sakura simply had to go get engaged with someone else.

And Sasuke's list of willing uteruses—he did have one, but contrary to what anyone might think, it was a fallacy of a list, as it had only one name in it, that of Haruno Sakura's—was sadly and pathetically outdated.

Now, he simply didn't know what to do. One thing was clear, though, he wasn't, under any circumstance, going to tell Sakura how he felt.

He may be an ass to her all these years—Naruto had made him see that the other day, when he tried to claim otherwise—but no more, Sasuke would no longer hurt her. She deserved someone better than him, and if that someone was his brother, well, he had no right to argue.

Taking another swig from the wine bottle, he smiled ruefully and said to nobody in particular, “At least she would still become Uchiha Sakura like I planned, and there would still be little Uchiha children by her.”

But then his heart gave a painful lurch, the bitter irony getting the better of him, and he left the most important part left unsaid,



‘—*just, not by me.*’

Before him, on the table, Itachi’s note lay open. It told him to go to the tailor’s tomorrow morning to get fitted.

Sasuke was going to be the best man.

Itachi, on the other hand, was worried. Sasuke was taking too long in realizing what he was supposed to do.

And his little brother’s stubbornness impelled Itachi to do something drastic, thus the little farce with the tailor.

Perhaps he had underestimated Sasuke’s ability to brood, and to make the worst decisions, and maybe things really *had* taken a turn for the worse.

Still, it was too late to back out now. If Sasuke would not do *something* soon, Itachi might be forced to take things to the altar—Sasuke would interfere then, he was sure of it, but it would just be too messy of an affair. And he would have liked to avoid it.

Sakura was wearing a white wedding dress when Sasuke saw her again.

They were in the fitting room of one of the city’s finest tailoring shops. And Sakura was standing in front of a mirror, gazing at her reflection with a whimsical expression on her face.

He couldn’t describe her. He couldn’t even pick out the details of the dress. All he knew was that she looked *beautiful*.

And right then, at that moment, there was no helping it. The words came tumbling out of his mouth.

“I hate you.”

Startled, Sakura whirled around to face him and looked at him with an expression of sheer disbelief.

“Sasuke!”

“I hate you,” he repeated, with more venom in his voice.

He saw her lip quiver and, encouraged and slightly pleased with the fact that he was hurting her, he plowed on.

“You don’t—you don’t promise your heart to someone, then turn around and marry that someone’s brother.”

She was trembling, tears streaming down her cheeks, spoiling the image of the happy bride. But he was relentless.



“It’s just wrong, Sakura. I—I believed in you. I thought, God, I really thought that, if everyone in the world deserted me, I could be sure that you wouldn’t, that you’d stay by my side. I don’t have many people like that, Sakura. You know that. Itachi and Naruto, but they’re different. I thought you—” Sasuke seemed to deflate a little, breathing heavily and deeply, looking as if every inhale and exhale was agony. Then, gritting his teeth, he let his dream of marriage and children die on his lips.

Suddenly angry, he lashed out.

“I hate you. You’re the most—”

She couldn’t take it. Another slur on her character and she’d go insane.

So she, too, lashed out.

“You’re no saint either, Sasuke! You—”

“Hey, what’s going on here?”

Itachi, who entered abruptly into the room after hearing all the shouting, went to Sakura’s side and brushed a tear off her cheek gently.

“Sweet Dumpling, are you okay?”

Sasuke, who had never taken his eyes off of Sakura, sneered and said, his tone full of spite, “It’s bad luck for the groom to see his bride’s wedding dress before the ceremony.”

Sakura, having had enough, shoved Itachi’s hand away, and said, “You know what? I’ve had enough of this.”

She turned toward the older of the two Uchihas and said angrily, “Itachi, I don’t care anymore—blackmail me all you want, but I’m telling the truth.”

Then, she faced Sasuke. “There won’t be a wedding. Itachi’s not my fiancé. We met on the plane on the way here. And I—I told him my secrets. I didn’t think I would ever see him again, and I really didn’t know that he was your brother. I had no choice but to play along with his sick game.”

Again, she turned back to Itachi and said, “Go ahead, spill my secrets. You’ve already messed up my life. I doubt you can make it worse. No, no, wait, you know what, I’ll do it for you.”

“Sasuke, I love you, always have, never stopped. I want—I wanted to be there for you, forever. But it’s a hopeless cause, and I know that now. You obviously have the worst opinions about me and a relationship simply can’t be built on,” it hurt to say it but Sakura was strong, “*hate*.”

Then, looking down at her feet, she continued determinedly.

“What else? I have a mole on my left butt cheek and I used to stuff my bra when I was 15. I was jealous of Hinata-chan’s big breasts and at one point I sported a minor



crush on Naruto, but only because everyone seemed to have one too, and he suddenly turned popular. It was only a phase and I quickly grew out of it when I was reminded of how gross he really is. Oh, and I also stole Shikamaru's idea for his science project when we were in fifth grade. He was too lazy to make it because he knew it took a lot of effort. So yeah, my science trophy was undeserved."

Sakura took a deep breath and continued.

"But that's not all. I didn't play along with Itachi's little game simply because he was blackmailing me. No, I played along because it felt nice. It felt nice to be loved and cared for and it felt nice to have someone treat me like I'm special, to have someone put his arms around me and give me kisses on the forehead. Simply having *someone* felt nice, even if it was all fake."

She was close to tears then, but she took another shuddering breath and plowed on.

"I've always wanted you, Sasuke, to be the one to give me all of these things. But apparently—and you made it so damn clear—you hate me."

After that, she stalked out of the room, tore the veil off her head, and went into the changing room, locking it behind her.

Sasuke stalked off in the opposite direction.

Neither spared a glance to the other.

Sasuke was out on the building's roof, looking—glaring—at the busy streets below, when Itachi stepped up beside him.

The two of them just stood there in silence, letting the cool wind soothe them until they became calm. They vowed never again to fight each other, especially when their last one landed Itachi in the hospital, just an inch away from death.

So this time, there would be no fighting, no matter what the other did.

Still, Sasuke felt betrayed.

"What made you do it?"

"You needed to be taught a lesson."

"You tricked me."

Itachi shrugged. Then, "It wasn't all fake, you know."

Sasuke looked at his brother then, his expression contemplative, but he didn't say anything.

"I can," Itachi continued, "see why you fell in love with her." His tone was light, almost cajoling, but Sasuke could feel a pervading sadness in his brother's words.



But before Sasuke could make more observations, Itachi turned away and headed for the roof entrance.

He left Sasuke with a message, clipped but poignant, in a way that big brothers do when their little brothers do stupid things.

“Get things right, little brother.”

Meanwhile, Sakura was at the counter, sadly returning the dress she picked out, a bit embarrassed by the scene they had caused earlier, but was in too much emotional pain to truly care.

She smiled apologetically at the tailor, asking him to inform anyone who asked that she was going to go to her best friend’s house and that they shouldn’t worry.

Then, just as she was turning away to leave, a hand shot out from behind her and deposited a wad of cash into the tailor’s hands.

“Here,” a voice said, in a severely clipped tone. “It’s for the dress. Alter the best man’s tuxedo a bit to make it suited for the groom. I’ll send an agent over to coordinate with you.”

“Sa—Sasuke, I—what are you trying to say?”

Sasuke looked at her then, his face contorted into a look of pure and utter annoyance.

“Sakura, do you still have to ask?”

Regaining her wits now, Sakura said, “Yes! Of course!”

For a moment, she pondered if she should still be angry with him, if she should at least make him suffer first for hurting her. Or at least ask for an apology. But he was her Sasuke-kun, she knew that this was already hard for him, emotionally constipated as he was. And she was just so happy that she couldn’t, for the life of her, manage to raise just a teeny bit of resentment.

“You’re annoying.”

“I know I am! Now tell me!”

“I’m saying that I love you and that I want to marry you. Happy now?”

He sounded more confident than he felt. Inside, he was trembling, he felt like his skin was thin as paper. And if she wanted to, she could tear him to pieces right now. It would be so simple, it would be—

“Go down on one knee?”

“No.”

“Please?”



“No.”

“Well, do you at least have a diamond ring?”

“No.”

Sakura stopped, placing a hand on her chin. For a moment, Sasuke was afraid that he did the wrong thing by saying no. And for a moment, he contemplated doing what she asked. His knee was itching to bend, but it was warring with every fiber of his being, each cell clinging to that stubborn strip of pride that his lineage had bestowed him.

“Let me hug you then?”

Relief, strong and pure and beautiful, washed over him. And all he could do was open his arms.

The clouds were nice and fluffy, and cute. And Sasuke found that watching them was quite relaxing; In fact, it was fun, and very pleasing.

But the novelty of cloud watching waned after the first few minutes or so (he was no Shikamaru). And pretty soon, the clouds just became—well—*boring*. Looking for shapes and formations didn’t help either, because really, for a not-so-creative guy like Sasuke, all the clouds looked painfully like—well—clouds.

Cursing—not for the first time—that the love of his life lived in the homeland he disowned, and wishing that the flight from New York to Tokyo lasted for just an hour instead of thirteen, he turned his attention to something else, or rather, someone else.

“Hey—”

“You just have to *read* the spark plug properly, it’s not so difficult—”

“Yes, yes I know, the markings on the firing end, yes, but—”

“Exactly, the mark—”

“Hey!”

“What?”

“You two,” Sasuke ground out, “have been talking about spark plugs for the last two hours. Shut the hell up.”

Sakura looked at Sasuke for a minute, then turned back to Itachi.

“Remind me again why we brought him along?”

“I,” Sasuke began, putting a heavy emphasis on the pronoun, “am going to meet your parents. There is absolutely no reason for the torture to start early, so *please* stop talking about the goddamn spark plugs.”



Sakura turned again to face Sasuke, and on her face was an expression of mock anger.

“I’ll ignore that insinuation about meeting my parents being torture, Sasuke. But if it pleases you, Itachi and I can talk about moles instead of spark plugs.”

Inwardly, Sasuke groaned. He could hear Itachi sniggering in the background, while Sakura proceeded to talk about ill-placed moles.

She annoyed him to no end—but really, he wouldn’t have it any other way.

Home

Sakura,

Today’s the first day I watched the sunset without you. It was...

Sasuke stared at the note in his hands. He didn’t know how to tell Sakura how it felt to be without her. All he knew was that he had no choice but to deal with it; him being without her was his fault.

He had his priorities, and although she was incredibly important to him, there were things he had to do.

He hoped she understood that in the long run, it was all for *her*.

Sakura,

I ate escargot for the first time today. I could only imagine the amused look on your face if you had been sitting next to me.

Sasuke

“So as you can see, Uchiha-*sama*, the plan will be very beneficial to your corporation...”

Sasuke tuned the man out, fingers interlaced in front of his face. Most people would assume that the stance meant that he was bored; it actually meant that he was thinking, contemplating. Judging by the expression on the man’s face, the Uchiha gathered that the man was hoping Sasuke was considering his proposed project.

Unfortunately for the tense employee, the situation was far from the case; he wasn’t even thinking of any business-related stuff.





“Sasuke-kun...” Sasuke turned away, unable to continue looking at her in the



face as she stared at him, eyes shining with hurt and unshed tears. “Why are you doing this?”

“I need to,” he told her lowly.

“No, you don’t!” she cried. Her hand was fisted in her shirt. “You can let Itachi handle this—”

“No,” he hissed, “I can’t, Sakura.”

He finished packing and grabbed his suitcase as he turned around, still refusing to look at her in the face. Regardless, that didn’t mean he couldn’t see her with his peripheral vision, couldn’t see the tears pouring out of those emerald eyes. His chest tightened, and he firmly closed his eyes.

“Sasuke-kun,” Sakura whispered, “Sasuke-kun, please—”

“Save it, Sakura,” Sasuke uttered, and he slammed the door behind him.

“Otouto, the meeting’s over.”

“Hn,” Sasuke grunted, shuffling his papers as he got up. He ignored the calculating look Itachi was giving him and walked out the door.

Summer in Paris was beautiful, there was no doubt about it, but Sakura wasn’t in Paris.

Sakura.

I bought a white sundress today. And I don’t care how expensive the silk is—because it suits you. So accept it.

Sasuke

It was another morning without Sakura in his arms; he thought he was developing insomnia because of it.

The dawn crept over the horizon slowly, as Sasuke took a sip of coffee. He wondered if Sakura was awake right now.

He knew Sakura had as much trouble sleeping as he did; when he worked late, she would always be awake, albeit drowsily, in bed until he returned.

His empty arms ached to hold her, to feel her small, warm body pressed against his own, and the rising and falling of her chest as she slumbered on peacefully.

*He wondered if his cold departure had given her nightmares. The thought of Sakura jerking awake in their bed, gasping, fingers grasping for the place where he *should* be—and reaching nothing, causing her to unravel at the seams and cry—made him ache so deeply he couldn’t breathe.*



What was *wrong* with him? He had gone on business trips before, and had been fine.

But that had been before he married Sakura.

Before he left his pregnant wife at home, crying over his icy words of goodbye.

Sakura,

I'm in Rome right now—I remember how much you've always wanted to go to Italy. When I come home, I'll bring you here.

The look on Sakura's face when she would (*not if, because she* would definitely *come to Italy with him; he refused to think otherwise*) walk along the streets of Torino, and would taste *real* gelato became his drive to endure the long days and nights without her.

She hadn't called him since he left.

"Sasuke... your father's dying."

Those words had been a blow to his world. His father, who had always been strong, always sure, and the one person Sasuke believed to be competent enough to solve anything—

No.

Uchiha Mikoto looked like she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. Her gorgeous face was crumpled with exhaustion, eyes red and puffy. Concern welled up inside him, his mother—the first woman he loved—always had the gentlest smile and kindest eyes. His mother did not deserve this.

Sasuke wrapped an arm around her shoulders and guided her to a seat, watching her anxiously. She smiled at him, but it lacked the warmth it always had.

"Sasuke-chan...he wants to see you." Sasuke nodded.

"You'll be okay out here, right?" he asked her tersely, and she chuckled wearily.

"Itachi's on his way. I'll be fine."

Nodding, Sasuke retracted the arm he had around her and headed into the private hospital room.

Lying in bed, his father looked pale, as stark as the sheets around him.

"Otou-san."



“Sasuke.” His father began to sit up, and knowing his dad, Sasuke made no move to help him. “There are things we need to discuss.”

As Fugaku began to talk, a furrow formed between Sasuke’s eyebrows, which deepened as his father continued to explain.

“Sasuke, if you get this deal done, you’ll receive your full inheritance immediately.” Fugaku looked at him gravely. “You’ll finally be able to take care of Sakura as you wish.”

Sasuke pressed the unlock button on his keychain, stepping out into the cool night.

He couldn’t tell Sakura the terms of his business trip, and he knew she would fight him tooth-and-nail over his leaving. She hated these kinds of trips; he hated it more.

But he was doing this so they could live a happy life together. After this, he could finally invest in that hospital she wanted, and support her in everything she wanted to do. She could save all the kitties and puppies she always felt bad for, or she could help save the starving children on the street, or she could find homes for orphans and give them families.

He would give her everything she wished for.

He would do this for her.

Sakura.

New York City is like Tokyo. You’ll surely feel right at home here, even with those damn, rude Americans—although, you’ll most probably let it pass. You shouldn’t be so kind, Sakura.

I gave a homeless person money today. You’d be proud.

Sasuke

Forty-two days had passed. Forty-two days without hearing the lilting sound of her voice, and the way her laughter rang out; forty-two days without seeing her face pressed into the pillow next to him, or the frustrated look she’d have while attempting to complete a crossword puzzle, or the way she looked in his over-sized shirt while making breakfast...

He wondered if forty-two days were enough to make someone certifiably insane.

There was an empty feeling inside of him, one he recognized all too well. It had been how he felt before Sakura walked (*literally*) into his life. Before she had smiled at him, apologized for bumping into him, gathered the books she had dropped, and left. Before he had met her again and somehow found himself taking her out for coffee.



Before he had discovered what it was to fight for someone because once you found that one person, you could never imagine yourself without them.

Before he had fallen in love with her.

Sasuke buried his head in his hands, the heels of his palms rubbing achingly into his eyes.

It had been forty-two nights without her, and he hadn't slept for more than four hours without waking up and reaching out for the woman, who *(was supposed to be)* wasn't beside him.

Sasuke had never missed anyone like this in his life.

"*Otouto.*"

Sasuke looked up from reading a document to glare at Itachi.

Itachi looked right back at him, noting the shadows beneath *(and in)* Sasuke's eyes, his weary body seemed like it couldn't take any more. Itachi didn't think it could, and he wasn't the only one. Their mother seemed downright alarmed when Itachi explained the situation with Sasuke, especially how he was taking it.

He bet Sakura, though, was worse off.

"Go home," he said to his younger brother.

Sasuke glared at him, though the elder could see it was half-hearted because of how tired he was. "What the hell are you talking about, Itachi?" he snapped. "I have a meeting tomorrow."

"I'll do it," Itachi said smoothly, slipping into the seat opposite his younger brother. "Besides, with the way you are now, you'd do more harm than good even to yourself. You're a wreck without Sakura."

Sasuke stayed silent—he couldn't argue with Itachi on *that*.

"Drive to the airport where our jet is stationed at. The pilot has been told to go directly to Tokyo. From there, my driver will take you home." Itachi's lips quirked upwards. "You can thank me later, foolish *otouto*. For now, go to your wife."

Sasuke nodded, surging upwards and striding towards the elevators, intent on packing as quickly as possible.

He was going home.

He hadn't slept in thirty-two hours, but that didn't matter as Itachi's driver drove up to a house that he hadn't seen in almost two months.



For a moment, he felt apprehensive. He didn't know how Sakura would react, especially after what he said to her when he left. He wouldn't blame her if she was angry at him.

'Suck it up and get in there, Uchiha.' he told himself firmly.

Getting the keys from his jacket, he slid it into the lock and turned it counterclockwise. The house was silent as he walked in, the pitch dark sky slowly breaking in a lighter shade of blue. *She would probably be asleep.*

Jetlag made his body ache, but it was overpowered by the hurt the situation brought. All he wanted to do was curl up beside his wife and sleep, sleep like he hadn't been able to since he left.

Softly padded footsteps headed towards him, a light flickered, and there she was.

Sasuke's chest tightened. She was dressed in one of his shirts to hide the bump in her stomach and her hair was slightly longer, but the shadows beneath her eyes mirrored his own. Regret surged within him, blocking every reason he had for leaving.

It hadn't been worth Sakura's pain.

For a moment, they just drank each other in. Sakura then took a tentative step forward, and Sasuke wondered if she was afraid of him. His chest tightened at the thought.

"Mother told me everything," she whispered finally, "why you left right after your father's funeral, and why you had to go on so many business trips."

Sasuke bowed his head, his sharp ears picking up the soft sound of a choked sob.

"Oh, Sasuke-kun," Sakura murmured, and then she was running to him. Out of instinct, Sasuke caught her as she jumped into his arms and cried on his shoulder. Her words were muffled by her sobs, but it didn't matter.

None of it did.

Sakura was in his arms, and he was home—and *that* was what *only* mattered.

"You," Sakura grumbled into his shoulder, snuggling deeper into the comforter, "are *such* a freaking idiot. Do you know that? When I get the energy to move, I'm going to kill you. Seriously."

"Hmph," Sasuke muttered, and rolled his eyes. It was hard to think with Sakura lying next to him, head pillowed on his arm, body so close he could smell the scent of her shampoo. He leaned down to kiss her, tasting chocolate and mint on his tongue. She sleepily kissed him back, humming delightedly.



“I really missed you.”

“Aa.” (*I missed you too.*) He didn’t have to say it—Sakura already knew.

She smiled softly, cuddling closer. “Sasuke-kun?”

“What?”

“I love you.”

She looked up at him, tracing his nose with her finger. He kissed her fingertips before moving her hand away. “Go to sleep, Sakura. You can fight me in the morning.”

She smiled and closed her eyes. “You can count on that one. You’re gonna have a *lot* to atone for, buddy boy.”

Sasuke found himself looking forward to it.

He tightened his grip on her waist and leaned forward. “*Tadaima*,” he whispered in her ear. Sakura did not hear him for her eyelids remained together, her chest rising (*and falling*) in a steady heartbeat.

Sasuke closed his eyes and slept soundly for the first time in months.

I 'm Yours

The three figures hidden in the shadowy corner of the attic gazed on at the blank pages of the thick, worn-out book that looked ordinary enough, with its simple brown cover and yellowish sheets.

They knew better, of course.

On their left side, the clock was ticking. Its sound was quiet and steady—a direct contrast to the three’s increasing heartbeats, increasing anticipation, as they waited and waited, breaths held, a seeming hush in the air...

BING. BONG.

Still silence.

They watched on, as the book remained unmoving, open and blank.

As the clock tinged again, striking a sound that interrupted the flow of quietness.

The blank pages glowed.

A moment of nothing, and the words came. They read it, as quick as they could.

Then, they stared at each other and sighed.

“Well?”





“Well?”

“WELL?”

Two of them winced.

“Not so loud, idiot.”

“HEY! I AM NOT—”

“People—back to business, please.”

“Fine, fine. So...can we do this?”

“...How can we not?”



“WE ARE BORN TO DO THIS! I AM THE FUTURE LEADER OF THIS TOWN AND I WILL MAKE SURE—OW!”

“Shut up.”

“Troublesome.”

“You think she’d go for it?”

“...How can she not?”

“You know how stubborn she can get.”

“AND SHE’S ADORABLE THAT WA—OW! Okay, okay...she’s adorable that way! Hah! I’m not loud anymore!”

Another sigh of weariness. A calm shrug of shoulders.

“I guess we’ll need help.”

“Any ideas?”

A pause.

A smirk.

“Yes. I have one.”

A plan.

“Ooh, but I have a better one!”

He was ignored, of course.

The clock stopped ringing, and went back to its steady, soothing beat. Footsteps shuffled, and the three figures went down from the attic, their minds filled with thoughts—with worries—though none of it showed on their faces.

Well, none of it showed on two of the three faces.

The book was once again blank, and lying closed on the same corner, to be forgotten. It was not needed anymore, and it would not be needed for a long time.

“Hey! I said I have a plan! Why isn’t anyone listening to me?”

“Nara, could you make the idiot shut up?”

“It’s troublesome, Hyuuga.”

“What is? Because my awesome, brilliant plan isn’t!”

“...Shut up.”

It was now March 28.



i. Secret

Day One.

“Forehead girl! Get your butt out here this instant—or else I will get it out for you!”

Haruno Sakura ignored the shrill, banshee-like voice of the female calling her name—rather, her dubbed nickname, ever since her wide-forehead-days back in kindergarten—from outside her room, and continued doing her business, critically eyeing her closet to see what outfit she was going to wear for the night.

Not that there were many to choose from, really.

Save for a few hospital internship uniforms, some shirts, sweaters, jeans, three pairs of pajamas (which she *always* wore), a black lingerie (which she *never* wore), and a very boring summer skirt that already looked a bit yellowish instead of the white it was supposed to be, her closet was basically...empty.

“Jeez, Forehead. I didn’t realize your closet was so boring.”

Green eyes widened—and Sakura then jumped, squeaked, and hurriedly covered herself up with her earlier-forgotten towel. Then, she proceeded to glare at the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, nearly screaming girl, one hand clutching the towel tightly around her and the other resting on her hip.

“Yamanaka Ino! What the heck do you think you’re doing, startling me like that?”

Silence.

Her best friend ignored her, and continued perusing her closet in what looked like...horror.

Come to think of it, Ino hadn’t even bothered looking at her yet. Sakura scowled at this.

“Pig! I’m in my damn underwear!”

Silence.

The blonde finally straightened, her gaze switching from the closet to Sakura. Her perusing eyes travelled from Sakura’s toes, to her body, up to her face and hair—then to her underwear straps, which were visible above the towel.

She raised an eyebrow delicately at the sight.

“You call *that* underwear?”

Sakura raised an eyebrow in response.

“What do you call this in your weird world, then?”



“I call it trash—which is why I brought you something else.”

With that, the blonde calmly walked back to the bedroom door and behind it, whipped out a dark red plastic bag that looked shiny and new. Her hand went inside the bag, taking out something that looked small, flimsy and... racy.

Sakura’s eyes narrowed.

“No,” she bit out.

Ino’s eyes narrowed back.

“Yes,” she hissed. She tossed the item abruptly at Sakura, who caught it in irritation.

“I said no, Pig.” (not that Ino looked like a pig—the girl was *gorgeous*)

“Well, I said yes, Forehead. You are *not* supposed to contradict me.”

“Why not?” Sakura asked rudely.

“Because it’s your birthday and you promised you’d be nice to me.”

A pause.

“...No, Ino,” Sakura drawled out sweetly.

The blonde merely smirked.

“Nice try, Forehead. Now get rid of that hideous-undie-thingy-whatever-it-is-trash—*this*, you have to wear.”

And with that, Ino whipped out another item from the red bag. Something smaller, flimsier and...lacy.

Very, very lacy.

When Sakura realized what it was, she paled and shook her head in vehemence.

“Oh, no, if you think I’m wearing that—”

“Happy birthday, Sakura!”

“—and if you think I’m going to give in just because you decided to call me Sakura and *not* Forehead girl—”

“I will tell everyone how you moaned your *favorite position* in your sleep last week—and *where* in particular you like to be—”

“—I AM NOT GIVING IN!”

Hyuuga Neji was observing the front entrance of the jazz bar for more than an hour now. He didn’t fidget, nor did he move—it’s the Hyuuga way, always and forever.



But he was getting slightly impatient, and that was saying something, considering how patient he usually was (in *his* opinion), free of worries or any hassle whatsoever.

It took two females' entrance to make him sigh in relief (inwardly, of course), as he sat (ramrod straight) in his wooden chair, finally taking a small sip of the coffee he had been quietly nursing since earlier. He looked back at the two females approaching them—then, his eyes narrowed when he took in what they were wearing.

Or rather, what Sakura was wearing.

"Nara, what the hell did your girlfriend do to Haruno?"

Silence.

Beside him, Nara Shikamaru was sleeping, one hand gripping his own coffee cup (which was still full) and the other folded below his head, as a makeshift pillow. It was the *other* person with them in the table who reacted.

Quite enthusiastically, in fact.

"Heeey! Don't call Sakura-chan that—it's rude and impolite and—
OHMYGOODNESS SAKURA-CHAN! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU WEARING?"

Sakura stopped and clearly squirmed. She blushed a bit, not looking at the other people in the bar—some of who were already staring at the little commotion.

Ino gave Uzumaki Naruto—Sakura's other best friend—a warning glance.

Naruto, naïve as ever, merely ignored it.

"Is it...okay, Naruto?" Sakura asked, almost hesitantly.

Ino gave Naruto another warning glance.

It was ignored again.

"YOU LOOK LIKE A STRIPPER!"

At the remark, Ino glared viciously at the boy—then, without further ado, she smacked him on the head and scowled.

"Ow! Ino-chan! She still looks hot!"

"Idiot!" Ino shouted. "She does *not* look like a stripper!"

Sakura, in turn, glared at Ino.

"I *hate* you, Pig," Sakura declared.

Ino gave her a confident look. "You do *not* look like a stripper. Don't listen to him—I'm the fashion expert around here."

Sakura scoffed, and merely folded her arms. When Neji raised an eyebrow at this action and politely looked to the right, she gave him a confused stare.



“Skin,” Neji supplied bluntly.

Sakura looked down, her eyes widening. She immediately unfolded her arms, her pink cheeks flushing red now at the amount of cleavage she had been showing.

Ino smirked gleefully.

Naruto scratched his head, his brows scrunched down, as if thinking.

“Sakura-chan, don’t you like your outfit?”

“No—” Sakura started as she caught the sight of Ino, who was *still* smirking at her, about to open her mouth—her loud, gossip-inducing mouth.

Sakura’s mouth snapped shut instantly.

“It’s fine,” she muttered reluctantly. Ino beamed. Naruto frowned.

Neji remained silent again—and impatient.

When was the plan going to be set in action?

As if hearing Neji’s thoughts, the blond loudmouth finally stopped scrunching down his eyebrows as if he now understood—or remembered. He snapped his fingers, his blue eyes brightening. He nodded his head enthusiastically, his frown becoming a wide, full-fledged, determined grin. Neji thought that this was the best time to announce the so-called surprise.

“Don’t worry, Sakura-chan! I’ll guard you through the whole process!”

Well, okay. Not *that* way, though.

Sakura stared at Naruto blankly.

“...What whole process?”

“The process of getting you your one true love!”

Silence.

Sakura paled again, as she read the words at the edge of the long table the three guys were surrounding—written in small but very bold letters, with sparkly red hearts all over, and an amount just below it.

Below the amount was a sloppy drawing of a pair of red, red lips.

And below the pair of lips were seven words that looked simple, really. But had the impact of—well, an explosion.

Birthday Girl’s Kissing Booth: A Charity Cause.

“Oh, hell, no. No. NO—”

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SAKURA-CHAN! THE PROCEEDS WILL ALL GO TO YOUR FAVORITE HOSPITAL!”



Ino smirked again. Neji gave out a determined, semi-resigned look. Naruto beamed brilliantly.

Sakura's mouth was still hanging open.

And Shikamaru kept on sleeping.

This was a really stupid idea.

Now that he was awake (courtesy of a very annoyed blonde girlfriend viciously pulling his spiky, ponytailed hair for even daring to sleep), nearly everyone had arrived at the small gathering they had planned (which wasn't really planned—it was more like a come-whomever-has-time-sort-of-event because Sakura wasn't the type to bask in big parties, unlike Ino), Shikamaru began to wonder why he let himself be called a genius.

Geniuses *never* let Naruto's ideas happen.

Sigh.

But the guy had begged and had badgered him and Neji (and Ino, who was in some ways, in on the plan as well) until eventually, they had to give in—else they would end up deaf from all the yelling and thrashing that was ensuing from the said blond, hyperactive, loudmouthed guy.

It wasn't like they had any other sane choice.

With a resigned grunt, Shikamaru settled himself at the end of the long table, amidst all the friends (who came and went as they pleased, because the table was really small, despite it being long) and conversation, and let his gaze linger on the pink-haired girl sitting in the middle, nudging her chocolate cake slice (courtesy of Hinata's—another friend of Sakura and cousin of Neji—awesome baking prowess) from left to right, her green eyes staring at it quite pensively. On her left sat Naruto, talking her ear off, as well as the person beside him—which happened to be Hinata, who was positively glowing (and blushing) at the attention. At Sakura's right sat Ino, chatting her other ear off. He saw as Sakura nodded once or twice, smiled a bit, shook her head, and took a big bite of her cake slice.

Then, his gaze switched to Ino when he saw her abruptly stop talking and stared at someone in front of them. Before he could see who was approaching, Ino was already standing up, face brightening and a mischievous sparkle coming into her blue eyes.

“Kiba! How lovely to see you here!”

Shikamaru raised a brow at this. So did Inuzuka Kiba, an acquaintance of theirs, who had stopped in front of their table with Akamaru, his pet dog, in tow.

“Since when have you ever called me Kiba? You *always* call me Dog-boy.”

Ino beamed. “Well, since it's Sakura's birthday and all, I just decided to be nice! Are you here to greet Sakura? Would you like some cake?”



“Yeah, I’m here to greet Sakura. Happy birthday, Sakur—”

“That’s great, that’s great!” Ino interrupted. “You’re done greeting. Now kiss her!”

At this, Sakura choked, nearly spitting the cake out of her mouth. Ino patted her back, and without further ado, began pulling her up until she was standing, too.

Kiba was looking at the sign with growing interest.

He then grinned, almost cockily.

“Free kiss, eh? Sure.”

Sakura glared.

“It’s *not* free,” she spat out indignantly. “It’s for a charity cause.”

“But I don’t have any money.”

Naruto, who had stopped talking to Hinata, stood up as well, and growled protectively, “THEN YOU CAN’T KISS HER, DOG-BOY!”

“I’m a great kisser!” Kiba protested. “I’ll show her a good time—”

Naruto raised a fist in the air. “NO MONEY, NO KISS!”

Shikamaru sighed. Beside him, Neji tried not to glare at their friend’s daftness.

Because Naruto looked like he was gonna explode any second now, Kiba reluctantly (and surprisingly) backed off, holding his hands in the air.

“Fine, fine—it *is* Sakura’s birthday, so I won’t argue.”

Sakura smiled. “Thanks, Kiba.”

He grinned. “No problem.”

But someone else had a problem with it, apparently.

Before Kiba could turn around and head for the bartender, Ino yanked him back.

“No. You are going to kiss her,” she threatened.

Naruto whined, “But Ino-chan! Money—”

Ino glared. “—can be compensated. Kiba!” she snarled. “Hospital volunteer. One week. Deal?”

Kiba stared.

Naruto scowled (why he was doing so when this was all *his* idea, Shikamaru couldn’t figure out).

Sakura glared (at Ino).

Finally, Kiba stopped staring, and grinned again.



“Deal. It will all be worth it, anyway.”

Clearly, the guy was flirting already.

Sakura glared at Ino some more, then at Naruto. She then finally turned to Kiba, moving her face forward.

“Fine.”

Still grinning cockily, Kiba leaned in, the table between them, cupping the back of her neck with one hand. His mouth touched hers. Coaxed.

Hers moved, too.

Neji, Naruto, Ino and Shikamaru held their breaths.

And there was—nothing.

Shikamaru sighed inwardly, muttering troublesome as he did so. Ino sighed loudly, and declared the kiss a waste of time. Neji merely grunted, and went back to his now-cold coffee.

Naruto yanked Sakura back, breaking the kiss abruptly.

“OKAY! NO SPARKS! AWFUL! NOT EVEN A SINGLE CENT YET! THIS IS A TERRIBLE IDEA!”

“Naruto, this was *your* idea,” Ino pointed out.

“OH—OH, YEAH! I MEANT IT’S A BRILLIANT IDEA! I’M A GENIUS! EVERYONE! COME KISS SAKURA-CHAN NOW! I’M NOT GONNA STOP YOU! IT’S FOR CHARITY! MY BRILLIANT IDEA!”

As Sakura looked on in bewilderment, Shikamaru sighed again, two thoughts crossing his mind.

One: that Naruto was an idiot.

And two: this was going to be a *long*, long night.

One hour later (and a *lot* of kisses in the process), Ino was just about ready to give up.

This wasn’t working.

It was true she had promised Shikamaru she would cooperate—heck, she had promised she *would* organize everything, from Sakura coming to Sakura agreeing with the plan (because really, everything was about Sakura here), to the kissing process, and to not allowing the birthday girl to freak out (or back out). She was the supervisor—meaning she couldn’t even join Hinata when the girl left, and went to the dance floor after being asked out by a really cute guy.



After all, the exact same thing happened to her a year ago. She knew what it was all like.

This whole prophecy.

With a loud, bored sigh, Ino drummed her fingers on the table, and tried not to scream out in frustration.

After Sakura had gotten Kiba's first kiss for the night, it seemed that everyone wanted to be in on the action—and by everyone, Ino meant *everyone*, including the dirty old perverts who thought they could impress and score her best friend. It was probably a good thing the three guys were there, ready to throw out anyone who dared to cross the line. With the black, flowing backless mini-dress that Sakura was wearing, it was absolutely hard to resist her—Ino had made sure of that. Genma, a resident playboy, nearly got pummeled (courtesy of Naruto) when he tried to grope Sakura's ass and breasts when he was kissing her. Lee, a Sakura devotee (who even had a fan club for her, with him as President and *only* member) nearly did, too, when Naruto grew tired of him raving about youth and springtime and constant declarations of love and conquering it all.

On a good note, the money basket that Neji had placed beside the table was now overflowing (gee-whiz, the hospital charity thing was really working).

On a bad note...none of the kisses *still* did the so-called job.

Sakura, in the meantime, was now torn between swollen lips (she refused to involve open mouth and tongue in said kisses, which was loudly seconded and supported by Naruto) and a rather weary-looking expression on her face.

Beside Ino, Neji leaned slightly forward, and whispered (*grunted*) in her ear.

"This isn't working."

Ino rolled her eyes, and tried not to huff impatiently. "Well, what did you expect? The idiot planned all this."

"You seconded it—enthusiastically, from what I recall," Neji intoned—still in a whisper, in case Sakura would happen to hear.

Ino glared. "So sue me."

Neji glared back, the way he usually did when he was annoyed.

Ino ignored him, and went back to staring at the line of men still trying to get Sakura's attention. It nearly surprised her to see Kakashi, their former (*perverted*) teacher, standing there, too—though the surprise (along with the suspicion, because heck—the man was still holding his little orange porn book) vanished when she saw him peck her politely on the cheek, after adding a rather huge amount on the basket.

A movement on her right caught her attention.

One look at who was approaching them held it.



“Oh, *HELL, NO.*”

Her exclamation caused a few heads to turn—including Naruto’s, Shikamaru’s and Neji’s. And Sakura’s.

Sakura glanced at the sight, surprise flickering in her eyes, before looking back at the table and away from the people who just came inside the bar.

Naruto didn’t just glance, though. He stared.

He then yelled.

“TEME! YOU ARE LATE! WHY ARE YOU LATE? I TOLD YOU TO COME ON TIME!”

“Dobe.”

Uchiha Sasuke, resident hottie. The man of all men. Number one bachelor in the town of Konoha.

And number one playboy.

Ino, like Naruto, stared at the handsome man in annoyance (this would’ve been admiration at one time, but she was long past that)—most particularly at the person he had latched onto his arm.

Or, to be more precise, the person who was clinging to him like a freaking *jellyfish*.

“You’re an hour late,” Ino said.

It wasn’t Sasuke who replied.

“Well, of course he’s an hour late,” his red-haired companion—the resident diva herself, Karin—complained loudly. “I’m not about to let him go to this lousy event without having some distracting...activities first.” She smirked at that.

Naruto kept on staring.

Ino began seeing red.

“Apparently, your taste in girls still hasn’t changed, Sasuke-kun,” Ino scoffed.

Karin glared. Ino glared back.

The tension between the two was nearly visible.

“Sakura...seriously. You can stop kissing my brother now.”

The sentence had the tension breaking, and everyone turning their heads towards Sakura, who had just leaned away from another one of their acquaintance—a freaky emo-boy named Gaara—a startled expression on her face and a delicate blush staining her cheeks.



“Er...that was nice,” she said nervously, before sitting down again, and looking anywhere but the people around her. Temari, Gaara’s sister, smirked, and it was obvious she was assuming that Sakura liked her brother.

Which Naruto seconded. Loudly.

“SAKURA-CHAN! YOU LIKE GAARA! YOU KISSED HIM FOR MORE THAN FIVE SECONDS!”

Sakura’s cheeks flushed all the more. “Er, well, no. He gave a big amount of money, so...right, Gaara?”

Gaara merely nodded his head, unemotional as always. “Hm.”

Naruto looked utterly disappointed.

Sakura simply laughed sweetly (more like crazily, in Ino’s opinion) and shrugged. “Next kisser, please!”

To everyone else, no matter how odd this was, they ignored it and went on to their business. They didn’t know Sakura inside out, after all.

But Ino did. And she knew why Sakura had kissed Gaara like that.

Most especially with the way Sakura was looking at everyone right now—except the very two people who had just came in.

Narrowing her eyes in contemplation, Ino prepared to stand up.

“I hope you’re not going to cause trouble, Yamanaka,” Neji supplied beside her. Okay, so she was wrong—apparently, he knew Sakura that well, too.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru muttered from somewhere at the side.

Fine. And so did this one.

Tossing her ponytail over her shoulder, Ino grinned sweetly at them. “Don’t worry, I have a plan.”

A much better one than Naruto’s.

She stood up. Smiled sweetly at her target.

“Sasuke-kun...why don’t you be a good boy and kiss Sakura over here?”

Beside her, she felt her best friend tensing up, before settling down and pretending to ignore the whole conversation. Ino kept on eyeing the onyx-eyed Uchiha.

“It’s for charity,” she said, innocently.

Shikamaru sighed again. Neji grunted again. Naruto stared again.

Sakura frowned.

After a moment, Sasuke nodded.



“Hn.”

And Karin freaked out.

Naruto was trying to understand what was happening, but it was getting hard, considering how confusing the situation was becoming—and how loud that Karin girl was shrieking the place down.

“I refuse! He’s mine! MINE! NO KISSING SOMEONE ELSE!”

To this, Naruto wholeheartedly agreed.

“I AGREE! TEME CAN’T KISS SAKURA-CHAN!”

True, the guy was Naruto’s best friend—but said guy was a certified playboy. Naruto would *never* allow someone who chased girls as a hobby be Sakura’s one true love.

No way.

Ino had other ideas, though.

“Shut up, both of you. I said it’s for charity,” she snarled. Determinedly, she yanked Sakura up from her sitting position for the second time, and proceeded to drag her away from the table, and directly in front of Sasuke. Sakura yelped, and tried to protest.

Karin glared viciously, and clutched Sasuke’s arm possessively.

“He’s *mine*,” she emphasized.

Sasuke grunted in annoyance.

“I’m not anybody’s, Karin,” he intoned blankly.

“Aha! You see!” Ino exclaimed triumphantly.

“Nor am I a charity case.”

Ino’s triumphant mood faded abruptly, as Sasuke nodded at Sakura, muttered a birthday greeting (to which Sakura only nodded back to), and turned to leave.

Naruto nearly sighed out in relief...until Ino’s expression brightened again, this time in mischief.

The girl smirked. “Oh...I get it now.”

A pause.

“GET WHAT?” Naruto couldn’t resist asking.

Ino’s smirk deepened.

“Karin’s just jealous and insecure. And Sasuke-kun is just scared that he wouldn’t be a good kisser.”



Sasuke stopped in his tracks at that. Beside him, Karin readily defended him.

“He’s a good kisser! I am not jealous! Why would I be insecure, when I’m the one he wants?”

“Prove it,” Ino declared. “Let him kiss someone else, to let that person judge if he’s a good kisser or not! Sasuke-kun?”

“Hn.”

“I bet you aren’t.”

Sakura looked on nervously, and tried to laugh everything off.

“Ino-pig, there’s really no point in all this—I’m sure Karin could attest that he’s a good kisser, it’s not necessary—”

“Alright.”

The word had Sakura’s little speech freezing.

“Wonderful, Sasuke-kun!” Ino chirped.

But Naruto raised a fist in the air.

Hell, no.

“YOU WILL NOT KISS SAKURA-CHAN!”

He was a playboy. A *playboy*. He was bound to hurt her if he did that.

“Stop protesting, idiot,” Ino snapped.

“BUT HE’S A BASTARD!”

“It’s just a kiss—”

“HE’LL TAKE ADVANTAGE—”

“It’s just a kiss—”

“SHE’S INNOCENT—”

“IT’S JUST A KISS FOR THE PLAN!” Ino finally shrieked out.

Silence.

“...What plan?” Sakura asked suspiciously.

Naruto nearly panicked at this.

“The charity plan, of course,” Ino supplied (*lied*) smoothly.

Naruto sighed in relief.

After a moment, he finally nodded reluctantly.



“Fine,” He grumbled. “But teme, money first!”

Sasuke handed some money to Shikamaru (an amount that could rival Kakashi’s), who was now standing beside the basket. He then stepped out of Karin’s grasp (who whined loudly, but couldn’t really do a thing), and turned to Sakura.

Sakura stared back at him in silence.

“One kiss. Not more than five seconds,” Naruto warned. Sasuke nodded.

Then he leaned in, and captured her mouth in his.

Naruto counted in his head, and assured himself that this was nothing. After this, they could go on with the kissing booth, to find the *real* person Sakura was meant to be with—the one person who would stop the curse, and finally free them. After all, it was a fairy who was supposed to save them, him and Sakura and Neji and Shikamaru, who were witches—though Sakura didn’t know that yet. It couldn’t be Sasuke, of course not. The man was one hundred percent arrogant *human*, so of course there wouldn’t be a connection, and of course Sakura wouldn’t fall in love with him and get her heart broken the way it did when she crushed on him all those years ago and—

His thoughts halted, when he realized that the kiss had lasted for more than five seconds now.

When he saw Sakura stumbling closer, and for the first time that night, opened her mouth, into the kiss.

When he saw Sasuke looking surprised as she pulled him closer, came closer, and murmured the raven-haired man’s name in pleasure.

And when he finally noticed that there was a certain, very distinct glow surrounding them. Sparks. Brilliant ones.

Needless to say, Naruto’s eyes bulged.

Holy hell.

Sasuke was a fairy.

...and he was Sakura’s one true love.

ii. Sakura

It was like she was melting.

Spontaneously combusting, with the way her insides were churning, the way her head was roaring, the way her blood was pumping. Her heart felt like it was going to fly out of her chest, and her skin...it felt like it was on fire, burning hotter and hotter as the seconds passed by.



He tasted absolutely delicious.

Unable to get enough of the taste and the subtle, masculine (*amazing*) scent, she pulled him closer, dragging her hands on his shoulders, then up his hair. Clutching them. It was like something was telling her to do it—like someone was taking over, pulling her to him uncontrollably. She murmured his name once or twice, before she continued kissing him, kissing him—was he kissing her back?

Yes, he was, her inner voice said. Unless it was her imagination. It couldn't be her imagination...could it? It *couldn't*. He was kissing her lips, his tongue coming out, his hands caressing her back, his body melding with her own—

She was suddenly taken away from the bliss, when the body nearly all over her own was abruptly, rudely yanked away.

"You pink-haired freak!"

Ignoring the voice, her humming body unconsciously went closer to the source of heat. To his heat.

This time, it was she who was abruptly yanked away.

"O-kay, Forehead girl—time for a little talk now."

She knew that voice...who was it again?

Heart still beating madly, Sakura opened her eyes.

And found herself staring straight at a fist heading her way.

She reacted instantly, ducking her head on instinct. The fist managed to graze the side of her hair, before hitting something behind her.

Thud.

Or someone.

"You stupid freak! You just hit my boyfriend! HE'S UNCONSCIOUS!"

Karin snarled.

"Well, it's this slut's fault for ducking!"

At the word, Sakura's head came up again, something dangerous coming into her eyes.

"I am not a slut," she intoned in warning.

"She is not a slut!" Ino shrieked, banshee-like voice coming to life again. Naruto covered his ears, while Neji hauled the unconscious Shikamaru up.

"Yes, she's a slut! What do you think you were doing to my Sasuke-kun?"

"I wasn't doing anything," Sakura protested. "I was merely letting him kiss me for the charity—"



“Which was only supposed to be a peck!”

“—it didn’t even last that long—”

“Like hell it didn’t, you stupid—”

“—and I didn’t even like it!”

At the last statement, there was silence—both from Karin and Ino (who had still been throwing out insults). Naruto hesitantly took his hands away from his ears, his earnest expression changing to shock instantly.

Sasuke was gazing at her in silence, his expression unreadable, his eyes intense.

Before Sakura could contemplate, she was pulled away by Ino once more.

“We need to talk,” Ino repeated firmly. “You guys come with me.” She gave one last glare at Karin, then a warning glance at Sasuke, before taking hold of Sakura’s arm and steering her away from them. “Goodnight, Uchiha and what’s-her-name.”

The last thing Sakura heard was Karin’s protesting voice.

And the last she saw was Sasuke’s gaze still on hers.

“You’re joking.”

“What are you talking about, Pig?”

“Tell me you’re joking when you said you didn’t like his kiss.”

“HEY! SO WHAT IF SAKURA-CHAN DIDN’T LIKE HIS KISS? HE’S A PLAYBOY AND—”

“Shut up, Naruto. This is so you can live, remember?”

“Live? Pig, what are you talking about?”

“Just tell her, Yamanaka.”

“I’m *getting* to it, Hyuuga. Now, Sakura, it’s as simple as this: you were lying. You had to be, because the way I saw it, there were sparks surrounding you and the Uchiha the moment you guys kissed.”

“That’s an absolute li—”

“Lie to me and I will tell *everyone* about that *position*—”

“Fine! I was lying! I enjoyed the kiss!”

A pause.

“SAKURA-CHAN, WHAT *POSITION*—”

“Naruto, shut up and pipe down!”



“Ino-pig, stop yelling at Naruto. Naruto, stop yelling. It doesn’t matter if I enjoyed the kiss, so what—”

“But it matters.”

“See? Even Neji agrees. And ah, Shika-kun! Glad you’re awake now, my love. I’ll get my revenge on that stupid red-haired girl later, but for now...will you please tell Sakura that the kiss with Sasuke-kun matters?”

“This is troublesome.”

“Shika-kun...”

“Fine, stop growling. Troublesome girl. It matters.”

“What are you guys talking about? Why does it matter?”

Silence.

“Guys?”

“Because it only means one thing, Forehead girl.”

“...What?”

“It means you just found your one true love.”

“My one true *what*? That’s ridiculous—”

“One more thing.”

“*What*?”

Another pause. A longer one this time.

“You have only three days before we all croak ourselves into extinction.”

She would never have believed them, if it hadn’t been for Neji’s eyes suddenly going white, Shikamaru’s spiky hair suddenly turning into a pineapple, and Naruto’s whole body suddenly sparkling a bright, bright orange.

“Guys, we’re in an alleyway, if you haven’t noticed. Cut the magic crap for now, will you?”

Slowly, the sparkling and the shifting and the color-changing vanished.

Slowly, Ino started to explain every little detail and secret.

...Slowly, Sakura started to hyperventilate.

“Holy shit.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Holy *shit*.”



“Yes, I *know*.”

“Holy shi—”

“Okay, okay, Sakura, enough with the word. Do you believe me now?”

“Wha—what?”

“What did I tell you? Repeat it, please.”

“That I’m a witch and Sasuke’s a fairy.”

Ino nodded in encouragement.

“That these guys are all witches and you’re a fairy.”

Another nod.

“That you’re Shikamaru’s one true love.”

Nod.

“That Sasuke’s...my one true love.”

Nod.

“...That you’ll all turn into frogs if I can’t make him mine. Through mating.”

Nod.

“In three days.”

Nod.

“...How do I believe *this* is all true?”

POOF!

Almost as if on cue, a puff of smoke surrounded one of them and replaced the body with a smaller, greener...*slimier* one.

Ribbit!

RIBBIT!

“My boyfriend! My boyfriend is a frog! Forehead girl, do something!”

...

“HOLY SHIT.”

It was at this point that the hyperventilating finally stopped.

“SEE, SAKURA-CHAN? IT’S NOT THAT HARD TO UNDERSTAND! SHIKAMARU’S NOW A FROG, SEE? AND YOU’RE A WITCH LIKE US! AND EVEN IF THE *TEME* IS A FAIRY, HE’S STILL A JERK. WE’LL STILL TAKE CARE



OF YOU AND HELP YOU AND—SAKURA-CHAN? WHY ARE YOUR EYES ROLLING BACK FROM YOUR...SAKURA-CHAN!”

And Haruno Sakura fainted.

By the time she woke up, she was back in her bedroom, with a worried-looking Ino hovering above her. Sakura smiled, and yawned, and opened her mouth to say that she just had the weirdest, most bizarre dream (*nightmare*) in all her twenty-one years of living.

Ribbit.

Ribbit!

Her mouth froze mid-yawn, and she stared as the big, green (*green!*) frog stared back at her, its little belly swollen, its cheeks puffed out, its black eyes half-sleepy, and its tiny little feet clutching almost lovingly to her blonde best friend’s shoulder.

“Now, Sakura—”

“ARGHH!”

“Sakura—”

“ARGHH!”

“Sakura—”

“ARGHH! ARGHH! AR—”

SLAP!

“Haruno Sakura! Get ahold of yourself, Forehead girl!”

Silence.

“Good. Now listen to me. And Naruto, no interrupting.”

“But Ino-chan—”

“I SAID NO INTERRUPTING. You, too, Hyuuga.”

“I’m not interrupting anyone. I’m not an idiot.”

“HEY! ARE YOU IMPLYING I’M AN—”

“I SAID SHUT UP, UZUMAKI NARUTO! Now, Sakura, are you still paying attention? Good—you haven’t fainted yet. Now listen closely and listen *good*, because this is a matter of light and death—”

“Um, Ino-chan, it’s *life* and death, not light and death—”

SMACK!



“...Fine! I’m shutting up! At least my voice isn’t loud anymore! Hah! I—”

SMACK!

“Ow...”

“Okay, now that that’s over...Forehead? Now listen: eyes on me, mind open. No freaking out again. And *listen*.”

And as Sakura remained sitting on her bed, eyes wide and alert (and trying not to think about how violent Ino was when irritated, how Naruto already had two lumps in his head, and how Neji and the frog were staring at her soundlessly), she let her mind open to the staggering possibilities.

And she listened.

iii. Sasuke

Day two.

“Sasuke-kun, would you like to butter my muffin?”

Silence.

“Sasuke-kun, would you like me to lick your lollipop?”

Silence.

“Sasuke-kun, would you like to have sex?”

“No.”

The single word was said in such finality and bluntness that had Karin pouting and folding her arms petulantly in front of her—not that Sasuke noticed. Nor cared.

His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, he ignored the red-haired girl sitting on the passenger seat of his dark blue sports car (his favorite of the five he owned), crossing and uncrossing her legs every few seconds or so. She was wearing an incredibly short skirt, one that blatantly showed off her thighs, and a sparkly tube top that made sure her cleavage was pushed up and available for his viewing pleasure—not that he bothered to look, anyway.

His thoughts were on something else.

Or *someone* else, to be more precise.

They had been, ever since last night—when he had unwittingly showed up at that bar, intending only to get a drink and get rid of his current companion (who had been trailing after him like a lovesick (*horny*) puppy ever since they had gotten acquainted one week ago at his family’s annual elite social gathering. Karin’s father was his father’s



business associate, and so he had to be polite, and entertained her for the so-called business' sake). He had never intended to go to Haruno Sakura's birthday, much less expected that the bar he had gone into would be the same club it was celebrated in.

They had never been close, to say the least.

Until last night.

Until those kisses.

...Not that he cared.

Why would he care? He wasn't going to think about it.

He *wasn't*.

He didn't even like her. She was annoying and loud and too smart for her own good—not to mention idealistic, the way she trailed after him in their childhood days with hearts in her eyes and a smile always ready for him, as she asked him out for dates every single day.

Not that that was the case now, of course.

She had gotten over him, that much was obvious.

A flash of pink had him changing the direction of his gaze, his eyes narrowing behind dark sunglasses. Without further ado, he slowed down, and watched as she entered Starbucks, her pink hair darting everywhere and her light yellow skirt flying behind her heels.

"Sasuke-kun, why are we stopping?"

"Hn."

"Oh, you're getting me coffee! You sexy beast! You're getting me sooo turned on right now..."

He slammed the door, and left Karin moaning (*annoyingly*) to herself, figuring she was going to do this for a while (she always did). The door of the coffee shop tinkled when he entered. He scanned the area, looking for that bright color that would identify his so-called target—

"Hey, did you guys see the Gossip Girl episode last night? It's awesome..."

—the one person who had made him curious last night, which resulted to that disastrous event—

"Did you hear who Gael cheated with on Mari yesterday? It was so dirty..."

—that one girl who wouldn't stop invading his thoughts (and his vision) last night—

"Here's your mocha latte, Miss."



“Thank you. That’s very sweet of you.”

His head snapped to his right at the sound of the voice. Sasuke watched as she smiled at the young man behind the counter who had handed over her coffee. Said young man smiled back, his eyes flirting intensely with her. She seemed aware of this (or maybe she wasn’t, Sasuke couldn’t really tell), for she only smiled wider, much to the man’s delight. Silently, Sasuke made his way behind her, eyes on the man—he must’ve felt it, because he turned his gaze away from Sakura and stared right into Sasuke’s dark onyx eyes.

Hastily, the man averted his gaze and nervously scuttled off to handle the orders of the other customers.

Sakura whirled around with a confused frown, before shrugging her shoulders. Because she wasn’t staring at where she was going, she ended up nearly bumping into Sasuke and spilling her coffee all over him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t see...oh.”

It would’ve been comical to see how her green eyes got so wide and her mouth opened into a tiny little *o*, if he had been paying attention to her expressions at all. But no. He was paying attention to how her hands tightened on her coffee cup, holding them for dear life. She took a step forward—then, almost as if she was trying to reprimand herself, she took two steps back.

She started to fidget and avoid his gaze.

“Er...hi, Sasuke-kun. Fancy seeing you around. Here to have a cup of black coffee? I recall that you hate sweets, so you’re probably here for something really bitter and sugarless and...yeah. You don’t like sweets. But it’s not morning, it’s afternoon, nearly night, so I don’t know why you want coffee in the first place. Yeah. That’s weird.”

She was babbling nervously. And she was flushing a brilliant, brilliant red.

“Well, I have to go! There’s this thing, you see, that I need to do, and it’s not like I need your help, and I’m probably bothering you, you should get your coffee right—eahh!”

All of a sudden, she was stumbling forward and into his arms, coffee spilling all over the floor, all over her skirt...

Electricity shooting all over his system.

He jolted, and so did she. Abruptly, she pulled away, her eyes still wide, her mouth still opened, her hands trembling and her feet moving back.

“I—sorry! I didn’t mean—it’s not—you know—it’s not...don’t look at me like that.”

The last words were said in a tiny, breathless whisper.



Sasuke tried to ignore the heat flowing through his loins at her voice, and tried to focus on her as she stared at him, then became a blur, as she ran—wait.

Why was she running out of the coffee shop?

Glaring at the gaping customers (because really, though her actions were that bizarre, it was none of their business), Sasuke inwardly sighed.

And he followed.

It was like a cat following a mouse that did *not* want to be found.

Not that Sakura was a mouse. She was like a tiger, really, with her temper (he could never forget that temper—nobody could) and her somewhat scary streak—

—and the way she kissed and plundered him last night, touching him all over—

Shit. Don't think.

“Darn it. Stay away!”

Ah. He found her.

She was inside the huge storage closet of the private section of the Konoha local library, after so many hours of trying to outrun and outsmart (*che!*) him. She was panting from exertion—but nevertheless, still trying to get as far away from him as possible.

“Sakura.”

Slowly, he closed the door, ensuring that she wouldn't get away.

“I—don't do that. Don't—we can't be in the same place at the same time! It's—not safe!”

“Haruno, what are you talking about?”

“It's not something you'd understand! It's ridiculous and weird and—”

“You're the one acting weird.”

“It's not something I can control unless I find my second true love and—and—don't come closer. DON'T COME CLO—CLOSER!”

Her breath was hitching.

He tried to control his own pulse's quickening.

Why did he even follow her?

“Haruno, quit acting—”

“Don't—come—closer—it's not—safe—I...just don't. Don't.”

“Why?”



“It’s...complicated.”

It was getting dark—that much was clear, judging from the tiny slit of a window up above their heads which showed the setting sun. Sasuke decided to stop coming near her and settled for leaning on the door—their way out—arms on his pockets. She was standing on the opposite side, stance cautious, skirt still slightly wet, gripping a nearby desk as if ready to toss it at him if he ever took a tiny step forward.

“I have time to listen,” he said bluntly.

“Maybe we should just go home—”

“Talk, Haruno. Or I won’t let you out.”

“You—you can’t do that! That’s illegal! You can’t—”

“Why is there electricity when we touch?”

She shut up.

Then attempted a careless, amused laugh.

“...What electricity? What are you talking about? There’s nothing—”

“Would you like me to come there and prove it?”

His voice was low.

The reaction was instantaneous.

“No! Don’t you dare! NO!”

“Then talk.”

A pause.

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“It’s unbelievable.”

“Hn.”

“Out-of-this-world.”

“Hn.”

“Preposterous—”

“Sakura...just tell me why.”

Silence.

Figuring she wasn’t going to say a single word anymore, Sasuke took one step forward, ready to test his observations again and—



“I’m a witch.”

He paused, and stared at her.

She stared back in half-defiance, half-hesitation.

“Along with Naruto, Shikamaru and Neji.”

He kept on staring.

She began babbling.

“We witches are destined to find our one true love, in different ways—they’re all based on a book, a magic book, but that’s complicated to explain, so I’ll get to that later. The point is, if we don’t comply to the rules, the prophecy, we turn into frogs. We need to find the one fairy, our true love, and make that creature ours. It’s my turn now, and I have to find him in three days—wait, two days now. Shikamaru had the same curse three years ago, and he found Ino, and—”

“I’m not a fairy.”

A pause.

“Well...you sort of are.”

Sasuke scoffed, not believing a single word coming out of her mouth.

“And I’m not your one true love.”

“You *are*. But I have my second true love.”

“...What?”

“I don’t plan to make you mine. It won’t work. You’ll just go around chasing girls like you used to in high school—” She faltered at this for a moment, her eyes shading, before going back to normal. She continued, “That’s why I’m looking for my second true love. He can save me and the others. He’s a fairy, too, and Ino told me I’ll feel the same sparks with him and—”

“Sakura...there are no such thing as fairies.”

“But you *are* a fairy.”

“Stop fooling around.”

Through the now-darkening room, he saw her eyes flash.

“I’m not fooling around! I can prove it! The magnet between us—the pull! You’re a fairy!”

“I’m not.”

“Wave your fist once! Think of light! It will work!”

She was a lunatic.



He should leave.

“It’s not—”

“Wave it! Wave it!”

“Sakura—”

“Wave it!”

He grunted in annoyance. “Fine. Waving. Thinking. Nothing.”

But it wasn’t a nothing.

Sakura stared at his hand, her eyes now sparking in triumph.

Sasuke merely stared at it in shock. There was now a bright yellow glow surrounding it.

“You see! I told you! It’s true!” she crowed triumphantly, coming closer to admire the glow in his hand. “It’s so pretty, Ino said her first time producing a light barely became a spark, much less a glow, but yours, it’s—I—it’s...oh.”

Because of her enthusiasm, Sakura seemed to have forgotten to keep her distance from him—resulting in her touching his glowing hand excitedly, and the electricity coming back again.

Her eyes flew up to his.

His held hers.

“I—you’re so close...I can’t help it—I’m sorry, it’s not...oh, Lord.”

And before Sasuke could even register that yes, he *was* a fairy (because despite his disbelief in such things, he knew reality when he saw one), Haruno Sakura was suddenly leaping into his arms.

And fusing her mouth to his.

His reaction was instantaneous.

Madness.

His mind blanked. His mind freaking *blanked*, as it never had before, the moment their lips touched, the moment he felt her touch on his and her kisses. The pleasure was careening through his system, sending huge tingles all over, making his body hum and stumble backwards until his back was on the door again, his hormones raging *all over*.

He gritted his teeth, and with whatever speck of strength he had left, he flipped her around, until it was her back on the wall, her legs straddling his waist.

The glow had long ago vanished from his hand.



He felt her hands go to his neck, rubbing soft circles there. He felt her tongue coming out, tracing his lips lightly, making him open his own mouth and let his tongue out to dance with hers.

He swore, he *swore*, he was seeing stars then. He had never been this desperate, this helpless before.

Hurriedly, he yanked his mouth away from hers, and proceeded to nip her jaw. She whimpered, and moaned, and put her hands in his hair, as he showered openmouthed kisses on her neck, on her throat.

“I—this is—Sasuke-kun...”

His name on her lips was the most erotic thing he had ever heard.

Slowly, she yanked his head back up and hungrily attacked his mouth again. His eyes crossed. Her hands went under his shirt, to touch his muscles, his hot skin.

“I need—to stop,” she panted out. “I—need—to look—for my—second true love. In a minute. In—a minute.”

How could she say that when she was still running her hands all over him, still pulling him to her tempting heat?

This was Haruno Sakura—childhood acquaintance since kindergarten, and nothing else. Ordinary girl, with an extraordinary brain—but there was nothing special about her, nothing particularly sexy, nothing particularly stunning.

You’re lying to yourself.

Maybe he was. But he never touched her before, because he knew she was innocent—not in the physical sense alone, but in everything else. His gut instinct had always told him that if he touched her, like he did to all those high school girls, he would corrupt her—her, who never showed anything but kindness to him (no matter how annoying it was at that time). She was pure. Ordinary.

And she smelled so good. Tasted so good.

Boldly, his one hand went underneath her still-coffee-wet skirt. She quivered, and he had the pleasure of hearing her say his name again, this time with a trembling voice. His other hand went under her plain gray shirt, bypassing her bra, dipping his fingers in, and—

“Haruno? Haruno, where are you—*holy hell*.”

And that was when it all stopped.

Sasuke glared at the hollow vision of Neji, standing inside the storage closet, flicking in and out of view. A magical hologram.

Why was he even surprised?



Neji glared right back.

Face red, hands frantically arranging every piece of her clothing in place, Sakura glanced at Neji nervously, refusing to look at Sasuke at all.

“Neji, what are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“It took me hours. But you were sending distress signals to us earlier, and Naruto and Ino were worried, so we’ve been looking for you everywhere.” He paused. “Though I hadn’t expected *this* to be your cause of distress.”

Sasuke immediately shifted his glare to Sakura. She ignored it, blushing a deep, deep color.

“Well...I...there’s nothing going on here. I’m still trying to find my second true love, as we speak.”

Sasuke’s glare intensified.

Neji merely raised a brow. “...Right.”

Awkward, awkward silence.

“So, um...where are you now? I’ll go there now. It’s—*yawn*—really late and I should—*yawn*—just...go...”

Without further ado, Sakura’s eyes closed and slumped down on the floor.

Sasuke’s glare turned into an alarmed frown as he caught her (and tried to ignore the shocking electricity coming back at the simple contact).

Neji frowned at him.

“Don’t tell me she hasn’t had her coffee.”

“...What relevance does that have?”

Neji glared at him.

“In case you don’t know yet, Uchiha—even if you don’t seem so surprised anymore by the magic thing—we witches get our energy from coffee.”

“...Everyone does.”

“It’s our destiny to have coffee all the time. Otherwise we sleep nonstop.”

“Hn.”

Neji’s glare intensified.

Sasuke glared back.

“I’m coming to get you. Stay put, Uchiha. Don’t touch her—”

Poof.



And before he could even finish, Hyuuga Neji became a frog. A big brown one.

From somewhere in the hologram, Sasuke heard some grumbling, followed by a panicking male voice.

“It’s not even midnight!” Naruto whined. “How can he be a frog? I’M GOING TO BE NEXT! I’M GOING TO BE—hey, Teme! What are you doing there? Where are you? WHAT DID YOU DO TO SAKURA-CHAN? Don’t move! I’m coming to get you both!”

“Hn.”

With one last glare, this time from Naruto (which was nowhere near as vicious as Neji’s), the hologram vanished.

Silence.

Sasuke looked down and stared at Sakura’s sleeping form. She looked peaceful when asleep—so sweet and innocent, as if there was no temper or viciousness at all.

The electricity was still there—but as he continued to watch her and feel her even breathing against his skin, he was surprised to find the electricity turn into a gradual humming, and the humming faded away slowly, until there was none.

He pushed her hair out of her eyes and touched her cheek, his heart lurching when her mouth slightly opened; she murmured words in her sleep—none that were his name, but her voice alone was enough to calm him down, to make him wish she’d say his name again. Not in desire, no—but just in happiness, in contentment.

Just in familiarity, something that they never had.

This was dangerous. What the hell was wrong with him?

Well, you’re a fairy. What else could go wrong with you? His mind argued.

He shouldn’t be thinking of these things.

With a sigh, Sasuke settled on the floor and waited for instructions, his back on the wall, and the pink-haired girl curled up in his arms (as if she *belonged* there). He tried not to think, and tried not to even feel (which, at the moment, was becoming quite hard).

And he watched her.

iv. Yours

Day three.

“Sakura-chan! The name of your second true love is Sai! Sai, Sai, Sai!”



Sakura stared at her male best friend as he grabbed her hands, jumping up and down in barely-suppressed excitement.

Not that Naruto could ever really suppress his excitement.

“Naruto...how do you know my true love is—”

Ribbit.

“...is that *Neji* in your pocket?”

Dismissing a shocked Sakura as she stared at the little bulge in the blond’s pocket (and the little noises that accompanied every movement of said bulge), Naruto waved his hands in impatience.

“Never mind that.”

“He’s—you’re choking him! Your pocket is all zipped up!” Glaring at the blond, Sakura immediately opened the zipper and yanked the brown frog away. She cradled Neji in her hands, making cooing little noises as she did so.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto whined. “You’re spoiling him! Let’s get to the point here!”

She glared at him again. “Naruto, *you* are going to be like this in a few hours, so you *should* be thankful that I’m spoiling all of you and agreeing to this silly prophecy that I don’t even know—”

“But we *told* you, Sakura-chan—the pages are blank again! I swear—”

“Fine, fine. I know, Naruto. I get it. Now...back to your point? Second true love?”

The concept had never really sat well with Sakura. If you had your one true love...then what was the point of having a *second*?

She then remembered dark, dark hair and onyx eyes that never failed to make her heart beat faster, even without the magnet pulling them together. Even without the magic. The guy who was supposed to be her one true love—yet last night, after that wonderful, wonderful kiss (*make-out session*), he had dumped her sleeping figure in the arms of a frantic Naruto.

And she had never seen him again.

“Yeah, that’s why,” she murmured to herself.

It wasn’t her first time to be rejected, to say the least. He had been rejecting her since who knew when—everytime he ignored her in elementary, made out with a girl in the high school halls...had sexual escapades with every available and willing female in the university.

She was supposed to be used to it.



She told herself it didn't matter.

"Hey, Sakura-chan! Are you even listening to me?"

Shaking her head slightly, Sakura snapped back to reality and smiled brilliantly at Naruto. "Of course!" she chirped. "Second true love! My fairy charming! Let me at him!"

The blond gave her an odd, concerned look. "Er...he's right in front of you."

Blinking her eyes, Sakura focused, inwardly cursing herself for not doing so. She smiled dazzlingly again, hoping her second true love was nicer, kinder, and would fall for her in an instant and—

She stared.

Paled.

"Naruto...why does he look exactly like Sasuke?"

A nervous laugh.

"Well, they're distant cousins, but that's irra—irrevel—irrel—ah, I mean that's not the point! He and the Teme don't get along well, so I'm sure he's way better than him!"

"...Naruto, you do realize you're endlessly insulting your best friend?"

"Well, since my best friend's a jerk, he deserves it!"

Ribbit.

"And see? The Hyuuga agrees with me!"

"How do you know this guy's my second true love?"

Almost as if on cue, her body started humming.

"Oh. You see the sparks."

"Exactly!" Naruto beamed. "Now go get him! He has an appointment with you in a few minutes!"

Sakura tried not to look mortified.

"Hey, Sai! You, Uchiha guy! COME HERE!"

Of course he would hear him—Naruto was just about the loudest guy there was. The Sasuke look-a-like approached them with a serene face, moving just as gracefully as any Uchiha would.

"Naruto-kun. Long time no see."

"Sai! I want you to meet somebody! This is my best friend! Haruno Sakura!"

He turned to her. He smiled.



“Hi.”

With a deep breath, Sakura smiled back. “Hi.”

It was time to get to know her second true love.

And get to know him *intimately*.

She was flirting with him.

She was *flirting*.

Her hands fluttering all over his shoulders, smiling up at him as if he was special, as if he was the most fascinating person she had ever met.

Sasuke’s hands fisted in his pockets, a frown forming in his face.

He had never really liked his fake-smiled relative.

Sure, the guy looked decent and formal and nice—but Sai was a good-for-nothing playboy, just like Sasuke himself. The only difference was, Sasuke was upfront about it, making no excuses for who he was, for what he was.

Sai was the sneaky cousin.

It annoyed Sasuke that Sakura was flirting almost shamelessly with the guy (ignoring, of course, the fact that he, Sasuke, did the same thing to almost every girl he met)—and it annoyed him that he was annoyed. He had come here to tell her good luck on her quest, because he knew he wasn’t meant for the role—never had been, never would be.

Only to be faced with *this* sight.

Sasuke watched as Sai leaned forward and gave the pink-haired girl (*she’s so oblivious!*) a polite (*lingering!*) peck on the cheek. She blushed.

Then, she turned her cheek...and placed her mouth on his.

Sparks instantly began flying everywhere.

Sasuke’s head roared, as he saw Sai pull her closer.

Sasuke’s blood boiled, as he saw Sakura cling to the guy and say his name in a murmur.

Something in him ached. So badly that he couldn’t ignore it.

He had a feeling he wouldn’t be able to in a long, long time.

“Oh, my goodness. You’re jealous.”



The sound of the shrill, whispered-out voice (not that it was anything as soft as a whisper) had Sasuke's head snapping back. It took him a moment to see that his hands were out of his pockets, burning a bright red now.

It took him another to register Ino standing beside him, staring at him as if he had grown two more heads.

"Hn."

Ino kept on staring, blue eyes wide. "You *like* her."

"I do not," he said firmly.

"And not in the lust way, though that's part of it, obviously—you're a male, duh—but you actually *like* her."

"No," he said, more bluntly this time. Impossible. He even scoffed for good measure.

Ino eyed him thoughtfully.

"So you don't mind if she and Sai have a wild, passionate *time* before the sun sets? It's all for the curse, you know."

His red hands glowed even redder.

Her gaze turned gleeful.

"Uchiha? You know there's only one solution to that."

"..."

"Sabotage. And I know you're good at that and—"

Poof!

Ribbit.

"...Naruto?"

Ribbit. RIBBIT, RIBBIT!

Ino rolled her eyes and picked him up with a disgusted look on her face. "Orange frog—I should've known." She turned back to Sasuke, giving him a level stare. "You *better* fix this."

He frowned at her.

"And you *better* not hurt her."

With that, she stalked off, leaving him staring as Sai deepened the kiss. As Sakura accepted.

His eyes began to bleed a deep, dark red.

Screw not being meant to be.



Like *hell* her sparks with that stupid Sai were as brilliant as his.

Sakura entered her internship office with her face flushed, her hair mussed, and her clothes in semi-wrinkled form.

“You can’t see him again.”

And the earlier hope that had been surrounding her like a bubble earlier vanished into thin air, as she saw—*stared at*—who was standing inside her office, arms crossed, looking so sexy, and leaning on her little wooden desk as if he belonged there.

“What?” she asked, for lack of anything better to say.

“There aren’t enough sparks.”

“...What?”

Sasuke began to look very annoyed.

“Are you deaf, Haruno? Or do you just have fun trying to act stupid like that?”

Sakura pinned shocked eyes on him, before she finally recovered enough to glare, and stalked closer to him.

And took a step back, when the electricity suddenly began enveloping them like a warm, warm blanket.

Not a blanket! she screamed in her mind. *A high-voltage disaster!*

“I’m not stupid!” she snapped, putting her hands on her hips in defiance. “And what are you doing here, anyway? You have no right—it’s not like—*why are you coming closer?*”

He didn’t answer, choosing instead to slowly walk towards her, his lashes (*dark, long, sooty*) lowered, his lips closed tight. The sight of said lips distracted her momentarily, before she snapped out of it and stepped backwards, away.

“What—Sasuke-kun, would you please back off? I—it’s—eahh!”

He pounced.

She averted, and streaked straight for her desk, using it as a barrier between them.

“Uchiha Sasuke!” she snarled. “Quit acting like a deranged animal! You’re a *fairy*! You’re supposed to have grace and dignity! Just because there’s electricity between us—”

“I want you.”

Her breathing stopped, and nearly hitched at that, but she stubbornly stamped it back down and cleared her throat.



“I *said* just because there’s electricity between us doesn’t mean—”

“Is the electricity you have with me the same as with that bastard?”

She was *not* going to admit that no, it wasn’t—nobody and nothing could be the same as him, for he was Uchiha Sasuke, and *nobody* and *nothing* was the same as Uchiha Sasuke.

“Of course,” she said airily, folding her arms. “And he’s polite and nice and so sweet—”

“And he’s not your one true love.”

“Well, he’s my *second* true love, and that counts for something. We have a connection and—eahh!”

She nearly, very nearly had a heart attack, as without warning, invisible strings of magic started pulling her to him. He smirked, staying where he was, in the middle of the office, waiting for her to come to him.

She resisted, of course.

“No, Sasuke-kun—*Sasuke*—this isn’t—you’re playing—I—oh, my Lord.”

She watched, eyes bulged, as he slowly took off his shirt.

As his pale skin showed, his muscles rippling with every movement.

Her mouth instantly went dry.

“If you think I’m impressed, you—you clearly—don’t know me—this is barbaric, even for a fairy like you—oof!”

And she was suddenly in his arms (*not her idea!*), and her heart was beating loudly again, and there was a roaring in her ears that she tried to ignore but found she couldn’t.

“Where—did you learn that? That magic?”

Silence.

“...I practiced last night,” he muttered.

She closed her eyes, and tried not to think of how good he felt—how right.

He only wanted her for her body. To satiate his lust, their attraction. Nothing more. Maybe he saw Sai flirting with her, and thought his pride couldn’t handle it.

Why was he doing this to her?

“Don’t do this,” she whispered, trying to keep her voice steady. Trying to stay strong and resistant and wise.



But he covered her mouth with his own, and instead of hot and hungry, like his kisses usually were, this one was soft and gentle and thorough in ways that she had never, ever been kissed before. As if he was putting his all into it.

Her heart broke a little.

Then it fluttered, and soared.

And all rational thoughts flew out of her head.

She wasn't kissing him back—she was, in fact, *avoiding* kissing him altogether, her lips pressed tight; her hands clenched in front of his chest, stubbornly *not* touching. But he was drowning all the same, even when he tried to anchor himself, to look for leverage.

The kiss lasted for who knew how long—he wasn't counting. But the need for air arose (who knew fairies and witches needed air as much as humans?), and he reluctantly broke the kiss, keeping his gaze on her as he did so.

Her eyes opened, dark and dazed. And very, very green.

"Ours is different," he stated—grunted.

Silence.

"Say something," he demanded, annoyed now.

Something fluttered in her eyes—a kind of hope, accompanied by something else. She tamped it down, and stubbornly held up her chin.

"You like women," she said steadily—a contrast to her shaking hands fluttering and flexing on his skin.

He smirked. "I can manage without them."

"I yell a lot. I have a temper," she reasoned. "It can be ugly."

He shrugged. "It turns me on."

She flushed.

"I—don't know you that well. You don't know me, either."

"We will."

Silence.

"I fall in love. You might not," she whispered, almost vulnerable.

It was that that had him placing his thumbs on her cheeks, and cupping her face until she was looking him straight in the eye.

"We'll give it a try," he muttered.



A pause.

“You can punch me if I cheat.”

Which he wouldn’t. Not with her.

Silence.

“Sakura...give me a chance.”

And her face changed.

“Okay,” she murmured. Sakura put her forehead on his, and closed her eyes once more.

“But let’s take it slow. Please.”

He had no problem with that.

“Go out with me,” he demanded, voice low and husky.

“Okay,” she said, a small smile forming on her now-swollen (and *very* distracting) lips. She opened her eyes again, and he saw them sparkling with contentment. Determination.

Mischief.

“But can we do *it* now? I really, *really* need to fulfill the prophecy before Ino turns into a frog any minute now.”

He smirked, hands inching low on her shirt.

Well, *that*, he had no problem with either.

None at all.

Poof.

Poof.

POOF.

“That was troublesome.”

“I agree.”

“THAT WAS *FUN!*”

Neji and Shikamaru merely looked at their blond companion, the latter rolling his eyes.

“INO-CHAN! INO-CHAN! WE’RE BACK! CAN’T YOU SEE?”

“Yeah, yeah, Naruto. I can see.”



“THEN WHY AREN’T YOU LOOKING AT US?”

“Well...you’re naked.”

There was a loud *eep*, as Naruto hurriedly tried to hide himself behind a set of curtains in the vacant hospital room the four of them were in (it was the only place Ino could think of to hide them).

“You know,” Neji said in observation, “You’ve changed, Yamanaka. You would never have had any shame in ogling us when we were in high school.”

“Well, Hyuuga, that’s because I wasn’t in love before. I have only one person I’d love to look at naked now.”

To emphasize her point, she swiveled her head to her boyfriend’s direction and greedily drank in the sight of his naked body.

Neji sighed, and slowly took the bed sheets from the hospital bed, tossing one to Shikamaru and covering himself with the other.

“HEY! GIVE ME ONE!”

“Shut up, Naruto,” Ino complained, pouting as Shikamaru began covering himself as well. “You should be happy you’re back to being a witch. You look ugly as a frog.”

“HEY!” Naruto brightened up, completely ignoring the other blonde’s jab. “Speaking of that...does that mean Sakura-chan and Sai had sex already?”

Ino smirked.

“Not Sai,” she said in triumph.

A pause.

“...SAKURA-CHAN HAD SEX WITH A STRANGER?”

Which was rewarded by a very hard whack on his head, courtesy of Ino.

“What? Are you implying our best friend is a slut? Of course not!” Ino snapped. “It’s Sasuke-kun, you dimwit!”

Silence. Then—

“BUT HE’S A BASTARD! HE’S A JERK! HE’S A—”

“He likes her.”

“—WHAT? WHAT?”

“He *likes* her,” she repeated.

At this Naruto shut up and tilted his head to the side, scratching his head in contemplation.



“He’s never *liked* anyone before,” he said thoughtfully.

“Exactly,” she confirmed.

“But how could this be?” Naruto asked in confusion. “They’ve known each other for years! Why only *now*?”

Ino’s eyes softened at this, she glanced at Shikamaru, before turning back to the still-confused blond.

“Sometimes, Naruto...these things just take time, you know.”

A pause.

Naruto finally sighed, albeit reluctantly. “Fine, fine. I’ll give him a chance.”

“That-a-boy!” She enthusiastically went to him, intending to pat him in the back.

“BACK OFF! I’M NAKED!”

“Oh, *fine*. Spoilsport.”

“Ino, are you flirting with him?”

“Why, Shika-kun, are you jealous?”

“...”

“Yamanaka. How did you know it was the first Uchiha? Not that Sai guy?” Neji asked.

“Well, because I just know.”

“HOW?” Naruto insisted.

“Because it’s meant to be,” she declared firmly. “It’s bullshit to think that Sakura would settle for her second true love—Shikamaru didn’t, remember?”

And they all remembered how Ino had thrown a very jealous fit, all those years ago, when they all found out that Temari, Shikamaru’s second true love, actually lusted over him as much as Ino had.

It was a good thing he was a wise, wise man.

Heart content and happy beyond belief that everything was back to normal, Ino clapped her hands, tugged her boyfriend’s hand, and went straight out of the room intending to celebrate, and to make the world know that yes, life was good. That life was great.

In three years, another prophecy would come.

They had all the time in the world to prepare.

Three years later.



“Sasuke-kun?”

“Hn.”

“I can’t believe you stayed, even after all these years,” she teased.

“...Hn.”

“You must really love me, Sasuke-kun!” she chirped.

Silence.

Her eyes narrowed. “Because if you’re only in this for the hot, unbelievably orgasmic sex—oomf!”

She was stopped from her rant by his mouth on hers and his hands on hers, and everything inside her turning to liquid jelly. She sighed and gave in, putting her arms around him and enjoying the way her heart fluttered every time he did just that.

“I love you, you know.”

She focused her gaze on his and watched as his onyx eyes softened slightly (*an expression only meant for her*). Felt it, as his arms held her more gently now.

“Hn.”

Translation: Yes. I love you, too.

She moved her head, intending to kiss him again, to feel him again—

“HOLY FREAKING COW!”

She paused and swiveled her head to the table, where Naruto and the gang were sitting. Beside the table was the sign: *Naruto’s Kissing Spot—Free Ramen for All!*

Surrounding said table were Neji with his brows raised uncharacteristically higher than usual, Shikamaru with his hand scratching his head, and Ino looking like she wanted to either vomit or strangle someone to death.

In the middle of the table were none other than Naruto and Karin, making out like there was no tomorrow.

“Um, Sasuke-kun?”

Sasuke averted his eyes from her and turned to look at the sight. His mouth slightly quirked. “Hn.”

“...Help us find Naruto’s second true love, will you?”

He smirked again.

And she smiled.

“Hn.”



Jizz in My Pants

I *really* wouldn't go in there if I were you, dude."

Sasuke shot Naruto a withering look. The blond had effectively cut him off from entering the grocery store. The automatic doors shuttered and reopened, confused by Naruto's immovable stance. Customers behind them started grumbling. Sasuke pinched the bridge of his nose, having already spent the last two minutes trying to convince the idiot to move.

"Naruto, *get out* of the way. I have to clock in before I'm late," Sasuke growled, attempting to barrel through his long-time friend.

"Seriously, Sasuke, take a personal holiday, call out, hell *don't* call out, just *don't* go in there!" Naruto flailed his arms around desperately, trying to fend off the crowd of determined shoppers.

"You won't even tell me why!" Sasuke shouted, frustrated. "Either spill, or step aside!"

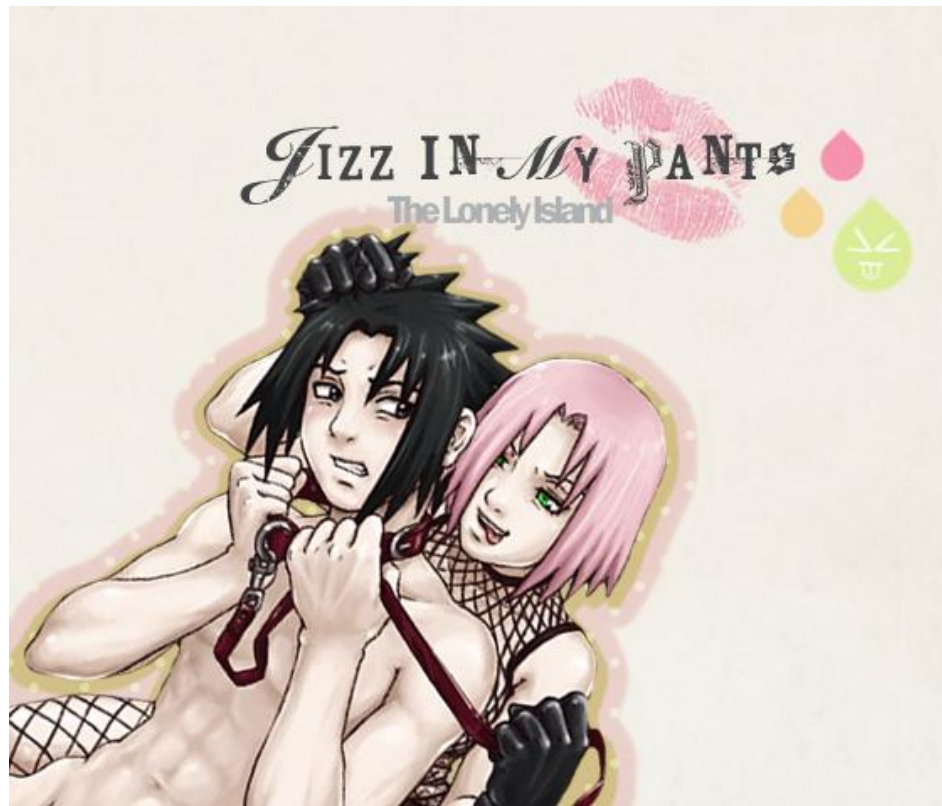
"Yeah!" someone else from the crowd agreed vehemently.

"Get out of the way, jerk!" another voice called out.

Naruto sighed in defeat, before reluctantly stepping aside. "Just don't say I never tried to warn you," he mumbled.

Sasuke pushed past him and into the entryway, before striding with purpose to the time clock. He sighed in relief when he found he was still technically on time. Punching in, he pulled on his uniform shirt and made his way to the produce section. On his way, he passed by the customer service desk, where he caught Tenten staring at him, before she looked away sharply with a smirk.





Come to think of it, Kakashi, the front end manager was also looking at him. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that all the cashiers on the front end had ceased scanning and now motionlessly gawked at him. As if rehearsed, they all began snickering before turning back to their customers.

Sasuke blinked twice, trying to confirm if he actually saw that before shaking away his paranoia and heading over to his department. The looks didn't stop there, however. Every single one of his co-workers suddenly had a new-found fascination with the reserved stocker. People he didn't even know worked at Konoha Marketplace were giving him loaded looks—most of sadistic amusement, but a few were even more disturbingly of deep pity.

He found himself retreating to the flower shop after only two hours to escape the sudden and unwanted attention. Was he going insane? Or did everyone know something he didn't?

Ino popped out of the cooler to greet him with a saccharine 'hello' and that same damned smirk the rest of his co-workers wore. Sasuke felt his irritation boil over into full



fledged anger. *Something* was going on here, and he had a feeling Ino, store gossip, knew full well what it was.

Stalking into the cooler after her, he pinned her with a glare that meant serious business. He was almost offended when she brushed it off to continue dating her bouquets.

“So, the minuteman deigns himself to speak to me? I’m lucky today.” She laughed, not pausing in her task.

“Excuse me?” Sasuke found it difficult to keep the outrage out of his voice. “What did you call me?”

Ino blinked as if she was almost surprised by his ignorance. “Minuteman. Racehorse. Instant Custard. Premie. Y’know. Premature ejaculator.”

“WHAT?” Sasuke couldn’t stop the scarlet on his face any more than he could hold back the tides, his helpless spluttering near involuntary.

Ino looked startled by his uncharacteristic outburst. “Everyone’s been talking about it. The whole store knows. I thought you’d already heard—Naruto *said* he’d tell you.”

Sasuke said nothing, merely passed a hand over his eyes and tried to control himself.

Realization suddenly dawned on Ino’s face at Sasuke’s strained face and mortified silence. “Oh my god, it’s *true*!” she practically screeched. “Sasuke, I’m sorry, I thought it was just a stupid rumor—”

“Shut up, *shut up*,” Sasuke hissed, pushing away Ino’s earnest apologies. “Who the hell told you?”

Ino shrunk, either intimidated or guilty. She clenched her lips together, an involuntary act of defiance.

“Ino,” Sasuke warned, though with less heat than before.

She hung her head and looked away. “Sakura. Sakura told everyone.”

Sasuke felt like he’d been run over by a power jack. *Sakura?*

She...

“She’s gonna *pay*,” Sasuke stalked out of the flower shop cooler, and headed straight for the pharmacy.

He vaguely heard Ino yelling at him to cool down first, but didn’t acknowledge it as he stomped past the produce section, past the row of cash registers and straight to where he knew Sakura would be working.

“Thank you! Have a nice day!” She smiled cheerily as she handed a prescription to an elderly man. She turned her head to catch the movement out of the corner of her



eye, and Sasuke had the dark satisfaction of seeing her balk when she realized the approaching figure was him.

She squeaked slightly before turning to run behind the locked pharmacist's door, but Shizune was quicker, and slammed the door shut before she could safely barricade herself in.

"SHIZUNE!" Sakura wailed, fists pounding the door.

"You had this coming, Sakura! You knew better!" Shizune chastised, before turning away to measure out some pills.

Sasuke watched her pout momentarily before she sighed deeply and spun around to face him, arms crossed, stance ramrod straight—face totally pissed off.

Well, why the hell was *she* angry?

"We have to talk," he seethed between clenched teeth, trying not to let the hurt of her betrayal be too obvious to read.

Sakura's lips thinned momentarily before she bent down to retrieve her purse from under the register. "I'm taking a break," she shot over her shoulder, not bothering to wait for permission.

They walked down the frozen aisle together and back to the receiving dock. One look from Sasuke and the grocery clerks and receiver fled, leaving Sakura and Sasuke to trudge out of the back door alone. Once outside on the concrete stairwell, Sasuke rounded on Sakura, backing her into a corner with the force of his outrage.

"What the *hell*, Sakura. Ino told me you were the one who told everyone about my...*problem*."

Sakura huffed. "Well, she was right." She picked at her nails in an attempt to seem nonchalant.

Sasuke deflated. He only just realized that a large part of himself had hoped this was all a huge misunderstanding—that one of the most mortifying things that had ever happened to him was not made common knowledge to every employee at this godforsaken grocery store by the *one* person he could actually claim to like here.

He wanted to be furious, but instead, he just felt like a fool.

"Why would you do that?" he asked, sounding far more vulnerable than he meant to.

Sakura's calm façade cracked. "Don't play innocent with me! ¹An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Sasuke!"

This brought Sasuke's rage back twofold.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? *You're not even Italian!*" he roared, fists clenched in vain to control his temper.



Sakura gave as good as she got, meeting his glare and stepping so close their noses almost touched. “It means what goes around comes around, Sasuke! I know what you told everyone and I DON’T KNOW WHAT I EVER SAW IN YOU!” she shouted right in his face.

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?” Sasuke shouted back. “I DIDN’T TELL ANYONE ANYTHING!”

“YOU DIDN’T?”

“NO!”

“OH!”

They both staggered back, breathing heavily. Sasuke shoveled his hands through his hair, and Sakura clenched her white tunic between her fingers. They met each other’s gazes sheepishly.

Sasuke broke the silence first. “What did you think I’d told everyone?”

Sakura emitted a grunt of disgust. “It’s been going around that you told people that I was some sort of dominatrix freak in bed.” She sighed. “I thought you were taking your insecurities out on me so...I, uh...retaliated.”

Sasuke felt his stomach clench that she would’ve thought he’d ever stoop to such depths, even if he had been totally humiliated. “Who told you I said that?” he inquired, planning a slow death to whoever dared.

“Karin.” Sakura sighed. “She swore up and down it was you. Listen, I’m sorry.”

Sasuke sighed but let go of the knot in his chest. It was all a big misunderstanding after all. “It’s alright, Sakura. I can almost understand why you’d do that, given what you thought I did. But seriously, next time, just talk to me and bump the burning revenge down to priority number 2.”

Sakura cheeks flushed crimson. “I would’ve, except...”

Sasuke caught her eye and raised an eyebrow.

She fumbled over her words. “You haven’t exactly... been friendly with me, since...” she trailed off, letting Sasuke fill in the blanks.

It was his turn to flush. “Um, yeah. About that. I’m sorry I ran out after I... well, y’know.”

“It’s okay.” Sakura hurried to placate him.

“No, it’s not.” Sasuke sighed. “I should’ve told you... that was my first time. I just didn’t know how to bring it up.”

Sakura gaped at him for a good five minutes. He was starting to get visibly agitated when she finally had the sense to close her mouth and shake off her surprise.



“I mean,” she started, obviously still disbelieving. “I never thought you were a... I mean, you’re so *hot*, I just *assumed*...”

Despite his level of discomfort, he still managed a smug smirk at those words.

“...Then again, considering your disposition, I should’ve definitely suspected...”

And then promptly deflated.

“Sakura,” he warned, and she grinned up at him sheepishly.

“Can you forgive me?” she asked matter-of-factly, standing and walking over to him.

He didn’t answer, but he did bend down to give her a quick kiss on the mouth. He then whirled around and barged through the back door back into the receiving dock.

“Sasuke? Where are you going?” Sakura asked his retreating back.

“To deal with Karin,” he growled, exiting the back docks and turning to head towards the salad bar prep room. Sure enough, the redhead was washing tomatoes, preparing to chop them up.

“You.” Sasuke’s voice was flat and cold, but that wasn’t really anything new.

“Hi Sasuke!” Karin greeted him enthusiastically, waving the knife around a little carelessly.

Eyeing the blade warily, Sasuke decided to go for a gentler approach considering she was armed. He focused his black gaze back on her be-speckled face. “You told Sakura I told you something about us being intimate?” It was technically a question, but it came out as more of a statement.

Karin blinked in confusion. “But, you *did*.”

Sasuke closed his eyes and counted to ten. He was ready to be done with this whole stupid situation—only here did his life get so complicated and dramatic.

“Karin, I’d never tell you something like that, much less...” Sasuke trailed off as he noted for the first time just how thick Karin’s lenses actually were. “Hey—were you wearing those when I spoke to you about Sakura?”

Karin touched the frames sitting over her nose. “These? Uh, no. I was washing the dishes for the night; the steam always clouds them up.”

Sasuke nodded in sudden understanding before the beginnings of a plan began to formulate in the recesses of his brain. “Thanks Karin. And in the future—don’t have any important conversations with ‘me’ without your glasses.”

“Uh...sure,” she agreed, still bewildered.

Sasuke left to go find Naruto—they had work to do.



Sai walked into several dozen pairs of eyes tracing his journey to the timeclock, the slow swipe of his punch-in card, scrutinizing the way he replaced it in his wallet.

“Hey Sai!” Konohamaru, a young bagger called out. “Is it true that you spread false rumors about Sakura and Uchiha because you have a crush on him and was jealous?”

Naruto and Sasuke smirked at his grim expression, and Sakura leaned over from the pharmacy counter to discreetly flip him the bird.

Sai smirked at the two friends in front of him. “Touché, Uchiha. You win this round.”

“Sasuke!” Tsunade screamed from behind him. “What have you been *doing* all day, jerking off? The produce section looks like crap! And *Naruto*! What did I tell you? If I don’t see you behind that meat counter in ten minutes, you’re gone!”

Sasuke’s triumph was crushed under Tsunade’s practical heel, but he caught Sakura’s grin before he returned to stocking his bananas.

No, that wasn’t a euphemism.

Not a Date

“It’s not a date,” he promptly stated. Smooth and direct.

She understood, probably believed him, yet she couldn’t fight the warmth spreading across her cheeks. He clearly saw this, though it never bothered him.

“Of course, it’s not.” She tried to match the eloquence of his voice.

And it meant that he already said yes. He would usually say yes to her, somehow, on different terms, for as long as it’s not a date or something like that. Or so it seemed.

She asked him to accompany her for a while to buy some books (if it’s okay with him, if he’s not doing anything, and he always happened to be free—he never did tell her to just go with her friends instead). He already went with her once, or twice, but asking him this kind of thing was always new to her.

And she knew that he knew too well the reason behind her invitations.

He waited patiently, browsed some books himself (mostly cookbooks, she noted), but never made any sign of buying anything. He tried to help her find what she needed: *Alternative Cures*, *How Doctors Think*, blah, blah, blah.

She scrutinized his actions from afar, impressed at how he looked so handsome, so thoughtful with those ebony eyes that matched the shade of his hair. He would glance





at her occasionally, always catching her staring, making him frown, and she would just smile back at him before returning her eyes to the book she was scanning, pleased with



herself.

Aren't you hungry?

No... you?

Well... there's a nice place nearby... I'll treat you for coming with me.

He scowled. She was guessing that he was getting annoyed at her.

Tch. It's fine. I'll treat you.

Walking beside him sent flutters to her stomach (and how she wished they could walk on the sidewalks forever). The sun was undoubtedly out that day. Though the clouds had its dark gloomy hue, signifying the possibility of rain, and despite the cold waft of wind against her skin, still she felt warm.

At times, she would gaze at the glass windows to check if she's still presentable, to see if her cherry pink hair was still in good condition, or to enjoy watching their reflections: him one step ahead of her and her skipping happily behind.

She didn't miss the stolen glances from some of the people they passed by on their way (him being so prominent and all that). She could tell from their faces that they were assuming the two of them were together, and how she hoped it was true, but it wasn't.

How about this restaurant? It's cheap... How about that?

He slightly moved his head to her direction, a sign that he was aware that she was still there, though he didn't stop or take a glimpse of the places she suggested. Not that it mattered to her; she had always wanted to gain some of his attention. At least he was reminded that he wasn't strolling alone, that he verily agreed to escort her this time.

(And she was actually contented at the fact that he found her annoying.)

She was caught off guard when he finally turned to face her and referred to the restaurant a few feet away from them. She readily agreed (as if she could say no) and followed. The venue was almost vacant, with only two tables taken. Perhaps this was the reason why he preferred the place, she assumed, he always despised crowded places. He led her to where he felt was the most comfortable table in the restaurant: at the corner, the one beside the glass windows.

"One bowl of ramen please." It was the best food that suited the weather, she mused, handing the menu over to the waiter.

"Black tea," he ordered for himself.

She laughed.

He looked at her, slightly baffled by the sound of her voice.

"You're on a strict diet, aren't you Sasuke-kun?" She gestured to the waiter. "Two bowls of ramen please."



She didn't want the day to end; maybe the rain could stop at least, because it never matched her mood. Or maybe she never really wanted the rain to stop, for it would make her day with him longer.

She continued to talk about various topics, like Naruto's fascination over ramen, the differences between the principles of their acquaintances, etcetera and etcetera, for she was fighting the silence that might intervene between them; for she might not have the chance to start all over again. She realized that he was actually helping her in his own subtle way, by means of his typical *Hn*'s, *Tch*'s and *Aa*'s—but not after she lightheartedly pointed out that he was worse than a mute. He glared, but that's okay. It's not the shut-up-or-I-will-smash-your-face kind of glare that he used to give her and Naruto whenever he was pissed off.

(And according to her, he was listening, though his expression said otherwise.)

He had finished eating his ramen minutes before she was done with hers and began sipping his black tea. She poured some honey in her own tea, lemon tea, almost three times already, and then copied the way he drank his.

"I'm sorry," she began, and gently placed her cup on the table. "...For taking your time."

(Although she inwardly had no regrets that he was wasting his day for her.)

His onyx orbs consciously faced her, and there was a tiny hint of confusion visible within them.

He regarded her momentarily, quiet and so impassive. And then slowly, he leaned against his chair and focused on his teacup.

"Tch, it's too late for you to realize that."

"But, I gave you a choice...and you said you're not doing—"

"There're more productive things than this." He was now swirling his cup like someone does with wine.

"I know." She breathed deeply, trying to be cool enough to talk to him in the most casual way possible. "It's just... I want to be with you... you see." She lowered her head, a bit disheartened, and took another sip from her warm drink.

His posture became rigid but was immediately masked by his customary composure. He had listened to her confessions every now and then, but her directness always startled his senses.

"Hn. that's a stupid excuse."

(A cautious response.)

She reverted her attention to the scenery outside the glass windows (to avoid what she didn't want to see or hear from him), her emerald orbs observing the droplets of rain that seemed to fade and became a drizzle. It was still raining, but the yellowish rays



of sunlight that were apt to be seen in the afternoon were still emanating, making an ineffable dramatic effect. It was rarely witnessed, but very normal, but just so perfect. Just like him.

“But you chose to be with me.”

“...”

“Thank you.”

She knew she was right.

She couldn’t hide the smile from her lips, and she could sense that he was simply troubled by it (it grew wider when she realized this). If he was just a conversationalist, then he would have long asked, *Why are you smiling like that?*

And she was glad he wasn’t. Because she would not want to tell him (nor would he ever want to know) the truth that he would actually say yes to her the next time she would ask him, and the next time after that.

He paid the bill not long after.

It was still drizzling when they left. But she thought she liked the feeling of the tiny drops against her skin, and he never seemed to mind it either. She was observing him, his every move, remembering how his actions caught her eye from the first time she saw him, and how he appeared to be like a moving faultless mannequin. He turned his gaze to her, very quickly, and there was again the famous frown on his face.

He held her elbow ever so slightly, somewhat guiding her, *holding* her whenever they would cross the streets and when the ground was slightly drenched.

Silently, *so carefully*, she tried to cease his hand from letting go, trying to enfold hers for just a *second*... but he had abruptly released his hold when he realized what she was doing (though she was sure that she felt him *tremble*).

(And how she loved those dainty raindrops lingering on his face...)

Stop staring at me.

Oh. Sorry.

She knew that she was lucky, very lucky indeed that she could get this close to him. (She really thought that it was destiny that played the part on the first day she met him—and how the simple remarks he gave her broke her heart.) But his surly words never mattered to her.

For as long as he was there, frowning or mad or annoyed—she would always love him. And she knew that she was important to him too.

And she shouldn’t be feeling sad because she could always ask for him.

Now and then too.



“So, can we... do this again?”

“No.”

“Some other time then...”

“There would be none.”

“I have faith.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Thank you.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“I love you.”

“...”

“I love you Sasuke-kun.”

“Stop talking nonsense.”

“I want to. And it’s not—”

“Shut up now.”

“I—*fine*.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“We’ll see if there would be another time.”

“...”

“...”

“When?”

“Someday.”

“Sasuke-kun I—”

“Someday.”

“...”



“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“Alright. Whatever your definition of someday is then.”

Red Carpet

Seven stars out of eight

★★★★★★☆

He finally reached his limit.

Shoving heavy books and a few garments from his closet to the open leather suitcase on his linen bed, he realized there was nothing that could stop him from doing the inevitable: dropping out of this project for good. The repercussions of breaching contracts and angry hordes of crew and staff could all go to hell, and he wouldn't even care to grace them with a single thought.

Crumpling the pages of the newly illustrated story boards, he then hurled them to the waste basket. After the satisfying throw, his fisted hands searched for the next thing he felt the need to destroy. Finally, after mulling it over for a second in front of the trash can, he impulsively decided that the crappy script was next.

But then, his hand paused when he realized that the page bore cross outs marked by fresh ink of a thick black scribble pen, unreadable with the blots of rain and salt water.

And underneath the scrawl were handwritten words, almost indiscernible.

She should just spit it out. Tell him straight to his face that she loves him, because it's her last chance.

★memoir

It was another day for the ever-vibrant four year old Sakura.

A pair of wide eyes shaded in refreshing green stared, truly enamored at the strange, complicated thing in front of her. Her mystified irises reflected the myriad of hues mixed, matched, and molded with assorted living people moving in such a tiny world, flashing to her quickly from a seemingly impenetrable glass window. Melodious,





tinkling sounds continued to trickle out from the small speaker, as a generic male voice rattled out words she could hardly understand.

She had never been so intrigued and hypnotized as she was with this contraption her father just bought. Even her parents were fascinated with watching the monotonous droning of the closed box since their pilgrimage to their cozy living room was now done every night.

But then, before she left this morning with a large porcelain plate of pink mochi as peace offering to her loud best friend-slash-neighbor, she stood unmoving in the center of the low-ceiled room—her gaze transfixed at the stirring sight.

It was an old, faded memory, almost like a photograph soaked in monochromes and blurring sepia, buried hundreds of feet under the plethora of thoughts and nostalgia, but she knew it all started there.

She remembered the dimpled smiles and dappled sunshine, the lullabies that tasted like sweetened lemonade. It was like an ethereal, magical place—glorified by her befuddled, childlike mind—that seemed to float with chocolate drops for pears and peppermints for their canopy leaves. A welcoming field of golden marigolds and bright sunflowers filled the wide expanse, of birch branches filled with creeping vines for seats. She could remember a couple of lines, some bars of the simple melody colliding to emulate a playful summer afternoon.



Slowly dredging through memory, her mind could only recall tiny details: a pretty woman who stood over her boys with a glowing smile, the gentle lines tenderly curved while cruising along the stone-cobbled path on a bike or chasing a fluttering yellow butterfly.

However, there was that silent small kid, who was humming at first in the background. He only joined in at the start of the chorus with a beatific, boyish grin. His small arms were spread, while running towards his mom for a hug, or tackling his older brother to the ground in a fit of high-pitched laughter.

At that moment, no matter how unexplainable it was, her young, young crystallized candy heart melted into chewy caramels. He was really, really more captivating than any doll she had ever seen, and she couldn't suppress the giggles that came out from her unexpectedly.

Soon enough, she was startled and nearly tripped on the red felt when a peal of laughter—warm like butterscotch cookies—broke through the oneiric haze of her fantasies. As her cherubic cheeks were brushed with a crimson tint, the petite tyke ran out of the door with a mortified squeak as matronly chuckles continued to echo through her flaming ears.

★ *origins*

They're all dead.

There were haunted screams, squelching sounds of viscera, and flesh being torn apart. Iridescent flares of crimson blended with the scattered faces on the cream hued walls.

Then, there were grumbles—coming from a seemingly depressed girl sitting in a corner—that dissolved beneath the thrums of an evil background music.

Definitely, Ino pondered for a while as the young dark-haired actor on screen now walked sinisterly, twelve years with Sakura should've been enough to be able to comprehend the cognition under that thick mop of pink hair.

"Forehead, honestly, we've watched this for the fifteenth time. I swear; the creeps finally wore off on me now."

"Shut—" Her companion paused to inhale through her mouth because of a stuffed nose. "—up, boar."

"Come on, you even know the lines...wait, are you—"

But they are coming. He spoke in dull tones, unnatural in that faded moonlight and the darkness of her small bedroom. Both of them huddled on the popcorn-infested mattress, *and you'll die—*



Then, the screen suddenly blacked out.

And so, Sakura burst out a howl.

“What the hell was that for, you stupid boar!”

Ino merely flipped the lights on.

Sakura squinted at the abrupt onslaught of fluorescent light that flooded the room and quickly grabbed the blanket to hide the tear tracks on her face.

“Just so you know—” With her hands on her lanky hips, she gracefully strode forward like she wasn’t wearing a mismatched pair of large yellow shirt and violet PJs. “—you’re watching a horror movie.” She then picked up the case featuring a single pinwheel and snake eyes staring under the chilling fonts of *Pinwheel*. “You’re crying. Something’s definitely wrong with you—”

But her infuriated tirade stopped in lieu of her astonishment when Sakura, vehemently dug her hand beneath her large pillow, managed to pick up a thick glossy magazine and shoved it to Ino.

“Read.”

And because Ino was more surprised than indignant to oppose the command, she obeyed. Scanning the text swiftly, her eyes stopped when she reached the reason behind all the melodrama.

“Oh.”

Ino, realizing her mistake, tossed the magazine to the messy swamp of their math homework in fear of being ripped to shreds by those already shaking fingers. “I’m really sorry.”

“A hoax. It’s just a *hoax*! I can’t freaking believe it!”

“But dear,” she said, placing a soothing hand over the hunched, quivering back, trying to sympathize with her devastated friend, “it’s a respected magazine that probably cost you half of your lunch money, not some tabloid—”

And with that, Haruno Sakura swerved angrily, looking distraught on top of her mattress. “He can’t just leave it all behind! He’s really—”

“Hey, slow down! Breathe!”

“—getting popular! I mean, he might not have achieved the same international awards like his brother did, but he’s a very well acclaimed actor here. He’s—”

“You don’t need to get so worked up on this, Forehead.”

“But I don’t want him to leave!” In a rush, Sakura stood up. Her feet, clad in a pair of wooly dark burgundy socks, kicked at every scattered article of clothing and paraphernalia on the floor as she scrambled clumsily towards the discarded pile of papers inside a drawer.



“See? See? I was working on this!” There was no mistake in that pride in her voice. “He has always wanted to play something more mature than his age. I’m writing this screenplay for his—”

“You do know.” Ino frowned. “That he’s not going to act anymore.”

“I don’t care!” And after a stubborn huff, she gave her most determined face, eyes gleaming like precious emeralds. “I’ll chase after him if I have too.”

Ino groaned; face connecting with her palm in a loud slap. “Stalker.”

“Nope,” Sakura corrected with an optimistic, saucy smile. “An avid fan.”

With Sakura’s legs sprawled in the middle of the littered mass of tin coffee cans, empty green tea pocky boxes and the wrinkled polyester cot, Ino laughed so hard she could hardly make her words discernable as she dropped her head to snuggle on the comfortable pillows.

“You’re hopeless, Sakura!”

And because Ino was too busy swallowing her chortles, she didn’t notice the fresh stains of teardrops that blotted the pages enclosed in those trembling arms.

★ *glimpse*

“Hey!”

The sole occupant of the gloomy unit merely ignored her, opting to bury her head in the quagmire of that wide messy table.

“Forehead, hello?”

Fingers that were almost dipped in an inkwell hovered over a black keyboard. Carefully, they froze for a while, a mere silhouette against the gray backdrop of a rainy windowpane and the glaring monitor. The hand then waved in greeting towards her.

“I thought you’ll be out of town for a couple of auditions?”

Trying too hard not to tumble forward as she nearly stepped on the hem of her long skirt with her needle-like stilettos; the young blonde snapped her head up in surprise, flaxen strands tumbling down her exposed shoulders. “How did you know that? I thought you’re cooped up in this place?”

“You were dressed to impress.” Sakura pointed to the window in front of her with an amused smile then tapped those stained nails on the cheek while twirling on her rotating chair. Ino noticed that this relaxed woman, again, used those two silly strawberry-baby hairpins on those bubblegum bangs. “And you always wear my old chandelier dangles whenever you want to look lovely.”



“It’s a waste to let such heirlooms collect spiders and dust.” Pouting her burgundy painted lips, Ino cleared the desk with one sweep of a clean, beautifully manicured hand, not minding the hissed *watch your big butt!* and sat demurely at the edge of the table. “And you should go out more. Like go to the beach, perhaps?”

“First, earrings and overalls don’t look good together.” With an irritated huff, Sakura pointed her pen towards Ino in disdain. “Second, no. I’m stuck right now, okay? I’ve been inquiring K.H. Entertainment, but they still said that all possible staff positions were already taken—”

“Well, Sakura.” Ino sighed as she gave a knowing stare, a twitch on the end of her lips. “You know that it won’t be easy to get into that huge production.”

“I know,” Sakura retorted as she furrowed her brows in contemplation. “But I have to try right?”

The blonde knew what she was talking about. Haruno Sakura was already two decades old and yet nothing really changed—except that spunk and the tendency to vex her often. This two-inches shorter friend of hers still hated her wide, dazzling brow and was still close-minded about one thing, er, goal.

Cornflower eyes rolled in aggravation. “Don’t you have anything better to do? You were already offered the position of script supervisor in a hit drama last month.”

“But, I heard that he’s coming back! And now, after all the worldwide honors he garnered for his independent films.” There was that fanatical glint that Ino found really familiar. “You know that I’ve been trying to get into the production team for months!”

“It’s a mature romantic comedy, Sakura. You don’t like to write romances.”

“Well, he hates them too!”

And here came Sakura with her know-it-all tone. Well, it was more of because she had memorized about a thousand facts about Uchiha Sasuke.

Yamanaka Ino would admit, probably in a drunken stupor, that she had once thought that the failure of an actor, who turned out to be an exceptional director, was hot. But Ino quickly changed her fickle mind when Sakura blurted out that he *loved* tomatoes; and because he was the most arrogant man she had ever—

No, Sakura would know in time.

“I mean, it was a surprise when he actually agreed to direct this movie. He likes to work alone, or do low-budget films. His comfort zone is bound by assorted political and social conundrums.” Sakura, unfortunately, didn’t realize the lapse of silence. “Then, he suddenly agrees to this local, big-budget film, more so a romantic comedy? I wonder what he’s thinking.”

“Because you’re constantly babbling nonsensical stuff again, I shall attempt to change this discussion.” Deftly recognizing that black rectangular thing sticking out behind the monitor, Ino picked up the remote from a protesting Sakura and pressed the



red button, pointing it towards the distant television with a firm grin. “I think we should watch some news.”

“There’s no news during Saturday afternoons!” There was a struggle to get the remote out of her grasp. “I don’t want to watch, I want to concentrate on my work!”

“You’re working on *that* again?” Ino suppressed the urge to tease Sakura, her snickers loud enough to drown out the sounds of an advertisement.

“What’s wrong with it?” Sakura furiously defended as she gripped the haphazardly collected and stapled papers, pulled open her drawer, thrust it deep inside that spacious lair and locked it back in place. “I want to write, you know. So turn it off, will you?”

“Shh, I really want to listen, Sakura—”

“You and your disgusting grapevine gossips, pig!”

Now for more scoop, the woman who sat with a calm air spoke confidently, There’re many speculations about who will get the role of the female lead for ‘Make-out!’, the most anticipated film of the year. Many assume it will be Karin Hoi—

“Slut,” both of them commented immediately.

“She’s a real pain to work with.” Ino grimaced and that alone spoke volumes.

“But she really has a great body, you know? I bet that’s why Suigetsu-san tolerates her,” Sakura quipped with a grin. “Besides, in your agency, she has an impressive—”

“Just listen, alright?”

—has never been his forte. The executive producer of the film has confirmed that Uchiha Sasuke has signed the contract and will start working two days from now for the adaptation of the novel. Everyone is, of course, second guessing—

“Isn’t Kakashi-sensei his manager when he was starting—”

“Shh, you’re going to miss the good part. ”

—but the truth is, they have finally cast the roles to new talents. And it seems that a certain Yamanaka, recommended by the Senju Model Agency...



But Sakura already stopped listening, or refused to look at the profile image that was flashed in front of them, as she practically shrieked at its real living counterpart while lividly pointing a rude index finger.

“YOU LIAR! YOU DIDN’T TELL ME—”

“Imagine, Big Brow,” Ino sneered, “what would you do if ever you went with me in a time-consuming audition? And you didn’t ask where I was going, you idiot.”

“But, but, Ino-*chan*!”

“Yes, darling.” Ino pretended not to notice the wounded puppy stare being directed at her with its full intensity.

“Please?” The question was quivering, imploring and pitiful.

“Please, what?”

“Take me there! I’ll give you my room, my sparkly clothes and—”

She suddenly halted when Ino grabbed her black tote bag on her powdered shoulders, shoved a piece of fancy paper to those pleading, clenched hands and smiled.

“What’s the use of being a lead star...” There was a smirk. “If I can’t have my own slave?”

Because that card stated that Haruno Sakura must report to work, four o’clock in the morning on Monday, to start as a set productions assistant on Uchiha Sasuke’s first ever shoot in Japan.

★ *paradise*

“Time-check,” she nervously breathed.

It was 2:59 AM as the large digital clock on the counter blinked sporadically. She was approximately two hours earlier than the call time.

Sakura could feel the nerves jitter since she overestimated the arrival of her colleagues. But that was expected of her, right? Production assistants, first-entry level jobs, were supposed to be early to prepare sets and coordinate with the place managers and assistant directors.

She stood anxiously in the middle of a Mediterranean-styled hotel lobby, seemingly lost. There wasn’t even a single recognizable crew inside the homely abode of the inn.

For the last thirty minutes, there were a couple of bell boys wearing flowery polo shirts because of the resort’s tropical theme, or some bystanders who were also waiting to peek at the film location, but still, no one arrived.



With great difficulty, after an additional fifteen minutes, she summoned up her courage to ask the manager if this, indeed, was the place that Hatake Entertainment had reserved. The congenial manager merely assured her that, yes, she was indeed at the right inn.

She then inquired about the duration of the filming, the number of extras allowed, if the backyard lot was already prepared for about sixty travel trailers, and when the hotel restaurant would start serving blueberry pancakes for an early breakfast.

While now chewing on a piece of orange, which one of the informants had generously provided, Sakura pondered on the exhausting whirlwind of events that took place ever since she received her ticket to Okinawa a day before.

As fate would have it, that smug pig's obvious hints for a sea escapade seemed plausible. Too much excited for that blonde's own good, Ino bought her a two-piece navy denim swim wear after they did their emergency Sunday afternoon shopping in lieu of the current occasion.

She didn't know why Ino did such a nice thing for her, since Sakura never wore anything this skimpy at work, except those murky overalls during her internship. But she knew this wear would be very convenient considering the inevitable chores she would do as a P.A.

She owed Ino a lot of things, so working as her personal assistant could be a sort of payment for this huge debt.

Though, she still wore a modest berry printed tunic shirt over the blue bikini, accentuating the thick, snug jersey swim shorts and her light razzmatazz-colored flip-flops.

3:16 in the morning. Where the hell were the others?

Fidgeting as she stood alone beside the information counter, beryl eyes scanned the lobby again. Nope, nobody from the production staff was here. There were only two people in the room: her awkward frame and a man who was sitting alone on the rattan couches sipping a warm can of coffee.

Come to think of it, she arrived at exactly 2:42 and he was just opening his drink back then.

From the periphery of her sight, Sakura tried to be discreet in observing him. She couldn't even see the shade of his hair, hidden beneath a flat charcoal-hued cap. He sat silently on the couch like a marble effigy.

Curious, Sakura side-stepped to get a good look at this stranger.

She quickly gave a quick rundown of his features while maintaining a good, respectable distance away: he was wearing a cool, roll-up button down shirt, clean slacks, a pair of leather sandals, and an open, untwined scarf on his neck. And by the set of his shoulders, she could easily deduce that he was lanky. He was wearing large smoky



quartz sunglasses, making half of his façade impenetrable to the naked eye. But his spine was rigidly straight, as if he didn't want to relax, reclined against the sagging green velour couch.

He must be an actor. Or a model, with such expensive clothes which seemed like he could wear them without sweating in the middle of June.

Maybe, he was part of the cast? Yes, yes. It could be. He did dress like he wanted to hide his face.

Was he famous?

With this transient idea coming up unexpectedly, Sakura prompted to set her best composure and walked towards him.

He stiffened.

A hollering call from outside the doors jolted her stride.

"Haruno!"

Mitarashi Anko came bounding inside the premises with a huge white AD printed on her large black shirt and on top of her recognizable dark visor hat. "Kid, you should've called us if you're already here!" Her admonition certainly made Sakura's kneecaps wobble. "Have you checked the room reservations?"

"Yes, Mitarashi-sensei," Sakura hurriedly replied, scampering outside where a phalanx of assorted crew and vehicles were parked on the coast line. "Room 69 has the best view."

"Here." Thrusting out a couple of thick folders to the bewildered aid, Anko continued to rattle on, "These are the schedules for each actor, including Yamanaka-san's shifts and breaks. Deliver them later when the others arrive at eight, understand? If someone complains, contact me here."

She was then handed a big walkie talkie.

"Any questions? Hurry up and you still have to prepare three set of clothes. We'll begin by mid-day."

Sakura could only nod in affirmative as another bark of orders was said. And apparently, that was what she could merely do for the next hour and thirty minutes with the assistant director snapping at her for errands.

"Call the transportation to make sure the grips arrive by four."

"Art department here? Check if they have the tarpaulin. I'll go there; arrange where to set it."

"Yes, Mitarashi-sensei!"

"Notify the caterers for everyone's lunches. Pick them up at 11!"



“Will do!”

“Where’s my dango? Haruno!”

“With lots of sweet sauce, Mitarashi-sensei.”

“Where are the freaking props men? They should’ve prepared the hut!”

“Already in progress, Mitrashi-sensei!”

With her aching feet and her taut calves almost cramping, Sakura contemplated about the current scenario. If she got another—

“Haruno,” her radio cracked *again*, after counting 87 rapid heartbeats. “Three C-stands, bring it to the lobby, now.”

With that, she went inside the large metal truck, had a little tussle with the equipments while talking animatedly to the people-in-charge, and came bustling out with three heavy rods on her shoulder.

As she briskly galloped on the sand and finally went again inside, she nearly tripped when the clock showed that it was already quarter to 8:00.

She should’ve noticed the stray light tendrils from the awakened sun to filter her befuddled mind, but she was too tired to even care about beautiful sunrises, especially when she was so sure her brain was *this close* to exploding and be smeared like paint over the walls.

And as the heavy pipe-like stands seemed to double its weight upon her clavicle, Sakura placed them on a nearby potted shrub, and then leaned her throbbing skull on a pillar.

Ten seconds, she piteously begged to herself, *just a ten-second break is enough*.

With her half-lidded eyes and her soft pants, she noticed something weird.

Eight seconds left.

He didn’t move from his spot?

Confused that he was sitting calmly in the middle of a frantic, bustling manic team, Sakura knew she had to keep him away from the work area at least. His presence might be intimidating, but it was as if he was waiting for something.

Glancing around if Mitarashi-sempai would actually appear out of nowhere to scold at her, she then proceeded to approach him.

“Hey?”

The man didn’t stir from his seat.

Was he sleeping?



“We’re going to shoot here in about forty-five minutes,” she whispered, trying to be as polite as possible. “If you want, I can—”

Her radio buzzed.

“To all available PAs, call Hatake at 8918355 and ask when Uchiha-taicho will arrive.”

“Wait.” Silently cursing Anko, she shoved her hands in her pocket to grab her phone. “Got it...”

And sea green irises widened in wonder, her palms became clammy cold and her breath shallow, when the man stood up fluidly. Her full attention was captivated by the man—tall, straight, *beautiful*. The sunlight shone behind him, creating a soft backlight, giving an illusionary halo that accentuated his intimidating presence.

Sakura was still engrossed with his visage, when she suddenly couldn’t see a thing.

A hat was plopped on her head, obscuring her sight.

Miffed, she raised the cap a little bit to see that the mysterious stranger, still wearing his smoky glasses, grabbed his own radio, and proceeded to talk.

“Mitarashi, set four,” a smooth, clear voice spoke, “we proceed to scene eighteen.”

Blinking dazedly, her mind processed what he just said.

“Proceed to scene eighteen?” Sakura managed to say without stuttering, though it was weakly spoken. “Bu-but—”

But that pig isn’t here yet! Sakura thought in panic, as she did her roll calls at the announcement.

“Forehead, you here?”

The lead actress finally came in, already wearing her shaded mauve plunging top, with lips glossed to a perfect finish, and a ready, confident smile in the most alluring manner.

Sakura had never envied her best friend, but right now, there was no way she could ever outshine Ino. Surely, surely, the blonde would catch the eye of that...that, whoever that strange man was—

Kzzt.

Damn all technology!

“Haruno, have you set up the C-stands? The focus puller needs them immediately. And since you’re already on set four, assist Uchiha-kaichou. If Yamanaka and Sai are there, guide them to the dressing rooms—”



As her superior continued to drone instructions at her hip, Sakura stared.

“Forehead?”

Insistent pokes were trying to wake her from her trance.

She looked at Ino, now with terrified eyes, while trying to suppress the urge to flail wildly in embarrassment. Because she was an idiot who couldn’t even recognize her own—

Uchiha Sasuke now blankly stared at her.

Automatically, every visible patches of skin of her head, to her nape, and to the points of her ears turned to an erubescence shade, rampantly spreading like a wild fire. She ducked her mortified face, hardly suppressing the gleeful eyes under her rose locks as she tugged a protesting Ino towards the powder room.

But everyone knew what that glance meant.

Their director was pissed off.

★ *violence*

Kakashi sauntered inside a private, well-furnished caravan one unsuspecting Friday morning. He didn’t forget to enthusiastically greet the glaring young protégé of his, or to explain why he was three days late.

“I got lost here,” he said while chuckling, successfully ignoring the deathly glare that was figuratively stabbing him from behind. “Because the road of life—”

Kakashi knew that his precious director wouldn’t listen to his idle talk, so he remained unfazed even as Sasuke walked quickly forward.

However, he raised a black-grey eyebrow when he saw his younger companion’s eyes swerved to the right, then, glanced to the left when they arrived at a corner.

Sasuke did it surreptitiously, with the smallest inclination of his head to the wall and the swiftest of glances at each side of the lavish hotel hall.

But it was a futile attempt to deceive Kakashi.

“Are you nervous or something?”

Sasuke continued to walk, resuming his usual poise.

As a production director, and also a humble CEO of an exclusive film industry, Kakashi had always trusted his instincts when dealing with this stubborn Uchiha. He couldn’t help but wonder what made this fearless, unfeeling man be afraid of his own stage.



As a fond uncle of the obstinate prodigy, he always said that Sasuke's technical skills were astounding. But he had never made a film that wasn't philosophical, or intellectually challenging.

He wanted something more passionate, in short, from Sasuke.

He did not care if he used blackmail and coercion to get the twenty-four year old filmmaker to approve, had a movie adaptation of the best-selling erotica as the project, hired his godson Lee as the chief screenplay writer, took the androgynous, emotionless actor Sai as the lead, and employed a lot of talented but truly naive greenhorns as the main crew.

Right now, as they proceeded to the studio for the promotional photoshoot, he wondered if there were nights when Sasuke would want to scamper out of this mess.

As soon as they had stepped inside the entrance, an irate Uchiha froze in front of him.

To his surprise, the whole set was already finished and was pretty silent, except for that mellifluous humming.

And for some unexplainable reason, the usually impassive expression of Sasuke was replaced by a glowering stare and a deep scowl as he watched that jittery young woman ecstatically humming the soft notes.

One of the propsmen, Tenten, greeted the recognizable bright tuft of pink as it bobbed up and down while busily typing on her mini white laptop.

"Hey, that's pretty," Tenten said enthusiastically as she approached the now attentive set worker, who looked up from the monitor. "What song is it?"

"*Look at me, mom,*" Sakura, in response, sang instead in a soft lifting voice, the chiming lyrics definitely heard clearly inside the studio, "*Shining like the sun.*"

If Uchiha Sasuke was capable of looking horrified, this must be it: he was as still as a statue. And if you looked more closely, there was a glimpse of a dark vein pulsing angrily on his clenched knuckles.

"*Bright as the day.*" Alto, dulcet tones maintained its rhythmic melody as the lyrics flowed like water. "*You're my number one.*"

And surely, surely, Kakashi thought, in the midst of the hilarious situation, they could hear that very silent growl emanating from the one beside him.

But the oblivious assistant didn't even know they were there, nor even realized that the others had recognized the song: Neji, one of the supporting actors, couldn't suppress a growing smirk, while Naruto, a guest, was now whooping a cheer.

Sakura suddenly stopped, much to the relief of the fuming director.

"I forgot what's next." And she playfully stuck her tongue out and scratched her head sheepishly.



However, Sakura underestimated the popularity of that little ballad.

"*And there's no treasure that,*" Naruto suddenly busted out in a high-pitched, baby voice while waving his tanned arms in a gesture so ridiculously like a kid, "*I will cherish—*"

"—*like you,*" trilled Kakashi, leaving the prissy man behind with his arms open wide as if expecting a big hug.

Just like what the four-year old toddler named Uchiha Sasuke did during his first ever appearance on camera: a commercial for a baby's milk, along with Mikoto and Itachi twenty years ago.

"Uzumaki-senpai?" Sakura blinked, with her feet nearly tripping on the scattered cable wires. "Hatake-san?"

"Continue, Haruno." With an encouraging tone, Kakashi supplied the next words, "*And when I smile—*"

Some of the younger helpers were looking perplexed why that cheerful song had made a profuse amount of homicidal aura dribble coldly in the room.

"*And when I smile.*" She tapped her cheek with a finger, like she was imitating that boy with those endearing smiles. "*They all see you glow. And they all know.*"

And the blissful blue-collared worker was unaware of the ominous wicked feel coming from that now grown individual, her back exposed to the angry Uchiha.

"*You're my number one.*"

And before she even hit the last notes, Sakura was already swarmed with questions.

"You *know* that song? That's very old school, man!" Naruto ran towards her, with those huge blue eyes and that infectious grin making Sakura step back in astonishment.

"You have quite a memory." Kakashi patted her small head, ruffling the short tresses affectionately. "It's really useful for writers who trained under Tsunade, right? You have an impressive resume. And Naruto," he uttered, now turning a stern eye to the very famous talk show host, "what are you doing in my set?"

"For an inside scoop, of course. And I can't believe that bast—" He then warily eyed the ladies. "I mean, he's making a romance movie. Of course, everyone wants to know the cast! Where is he anyway? I just saw him when you came in."

"What?" Her slightly tanned face turned pale.

"Yeah," Uzumaki-san spoke with a robust laugh. "He was staring at you, but looked like he ate a rotten tomato or something. Half-constipated—"



Sakura didn't even let him finish. With a horrified expression, she sprinted out of the makeshift studio to the supposed direction where Kakashi came from.

"What was that about?" Naruto inquired in befuddlement, bewildered at the girl's look of utter dread.

"Childhood traumas, I believe," Kakashi merely supplied with a sage-like tone, too giddy to add more.

★ *tactics*

"I deeply apologize, Uchiha-kaicho!"

Kakashi, and the rest of the higher-ups of the crew, was flummoxed during the late afternoon—while they were munching their pre-packed lunches of tomato-filled rice balls inside the cold AC office—as Sakura did a graceful, formal bow in front of Uchiha Sasuke outside their gathering cabana.

It was a full-body bend, complete with her hands firmly on her knees; her cropped coral tresses masked her face like a curtain.

And if it weren't for the fact that this certain Uchiha hated mortifying displays of apologies, she would've kneeled with her knees together and touched her large brow to the heat of the sand.

But instead of gracing her with a reply, Sasuke merely glanced at her and then walked away, puffs of sand on his sandaled feet as he headed towards the open door.

"I'll do anything, Uchiha-taicho!" the poor girl cried out, still unmoving.

She was waiting with bated breath when the director stopped mid-step from his tracks. And because Sakura wasn't looking at him—still maintaining that perfect straight posture with her eyes closed, her form abject in deep remorse—she didn't see that amused smirk.

"You're annoying."

He then left, as Sakura suddenly straightened her spine and mouth agape in surprise, as if she was actually ecstatic that *he* talked to *her*. It didn't even matter if those first two words he directed at her were—

"We'll start scene ten, now!" one of the Ads finally called out, but Haruno didn't register any of it. "Tetsuya, Junko and Akira, please, on standby! Haruno, take Yamanaka to—Haruno!"

"That's harsh, don't you think, Sasuke?" Kakashi spoke with a warning, as the director went back to his seat and started on his untouched meal.



However, there was a slight hesitation before he continued to bite his second rice ball. No one noticed, but that one gesture spoke volumes.

And Kakashi knew that this could only spawn something interesting.

It seemed that Sakura became enslaved with guilt to the point that it manifested into something that haunted the whole set during the following days. Each of the crew could hear the successive *imsorryimsorryimsorrys* that echoed through every nook and cranny as Sakura hounded every step that Uchiha-taicho took.

“I’m sorry.”

She said while giving the newly drafted scripts to Sasuke, who simply accepted them and resumed scanning the paper.

“I’m sorry.”

This was accompanied by a hot coffee, which Sasuke unceremoniously took and drank calmly with an approving raise of his eyebrow, but he didn’t even look at her as he sipped at its dark rim.

“I’m truly!”

It was a never ending muttering of apologies, as Sakura folded the director’s collapsible chair and then carried it while Sasuke strode towards the next set.

“Really!”

And this, much to the entertainment (*sympathy*) of everyone, persisted even though Sasuke kept giving her the cruel, cold silent treatment.

“Sorry!”

But amazingly, she still managed to assist the crew (*someone call the technician to fix the wires! where are the bolts? bring in more reels*), performed her duties (*nobody’s allowed to enter the premises, camera...action!*), and managed to escort their director or provide his needs no matter how little or impertinent they were (*here are the ripe tomatoes Uchiha-taicho*).

It perhaps lasted for a week, before a perplexed Kakashi thought to pry. It wouldn’t hurt if he poked his nose in these matters, right?

Besides, Sakura never knew, but a mad Sasuke usually entailed a vindictive response. A mystified Kakashi also knew that an irritated Sasuke wouldn’t usually tolerate these ridiculous antics. Most of the time, the unmerciful Uchiha would say cutting remarks and ensure that the hapless victim would just quit the job from the sheer pressure and abuse.



So considering Sasuke's apathetic behavior towards Sakura's inexorable attempts to get his forgiveness for her 'deplorable conduct' on that amusing morning, Kakashi could only reach one conclusion:

"Do you want a personal assistant? I thought you hated—"

He opened the door and stepped on the floor, but nearly stumbled and skidded clumsily on the slippery waxed surface until he luckily gripped the steel door handle for balance.

"—them. Besides, didn't I suggest assistants for you? And is it just me, or is your trailer really *this* clean? I swear, I can see it sparkling."

As he took a deep sigh, he inhaled a fresh scent of apple perfumes instead of the familiar whiff of sandalwood that usually permeated the Uchiha's quarters.

"The script supervisor isn't satisfied with the current draft." Kakashi sat and let his arms lounge on the leather couch, idly reading the mutilated script with a single scrutinizing eye. "I didn't think I gave enough budget for one more screenwriter? Or is this a proofreader? Whoever he is, he practically erased the whole death defying mush in this thing. Which is rather good—"

"You approved the script, Kakashi."

"And you're not a flower-vase-on-my-windowsill person."

Now, that was one very interesting frown from Sasuke. It was more of an irritated-puzzled look than an angry-puzzled one.

"Huh, daffodils." And because Kakashi was luckily wearing a large cashmere turtleneck to hide his grin, he then proceeded, "I heard daffodils are for the romantics. Symbolically, they're like persistent females who continue to face the harshest blaze of the winter, patiently waiting, without bowing—"

"Hn." Sasuke took the sheaves of the script and was about to throw it outside the window, if Kakashi hadn't caught it before it even grazed the air outside the trailer.

"That deleted scene is, yes, gauche. Very tacky! But that line is really touching! Imagine Junko offering a bunch of flowers to her prince who's in continuous denial!"

"Not necessary," Sasuke insisted, he meant that no further arguments would be discussed.

"Now, Lee wouldn't really mind if his entire script was thrown to the incinerators, but why the sudden changes?"

And Kakashi was truly, truly bothered when Sasuke merely evaded the question with that well-practiced cold shoulder and a threatening 'get-out-or-die' glare.

But of course, if there was one thing that Kakashi took pride in, it was his keen observation. If he put two and two together, he could easily guess who delivered the scripts to the whole crew, and had the time to mess with the director's copy.



So with that in mind, the eccentric thirty-year old stood and retreated by jumping out the large window.

One night, two hours before early dawn, Kakashi walked on the stretching white sand, wanting to savor the feel of the damp morn-evening breeze with its salted taste. He strolled on the low cement wall, holding the chain of Pakkun's collar with his right hand while reading the latest edited script of scene 42 beneath the scanty moonlight, where Junko attempted to intoxicate herself—

There was Sakura, sitting on the set hammock in between two towering coconut trees, hands in the air, face flushed in happiness as she swung the coarsely woven rattan like a swing. Her apparel was drenched while a towel was draped over her shoulders as if she had just finished a swim and was now preparing for a good night's rest outside. Her short hair whipped gently along the warm summer breeze.

He knew Sakura was always the last one to leave the set. It was nothing unusual since other PAs had done that too.

But it was surprising that no sign of fatigue was obvious on her carefree actions as she continued to blabber alone. She was probably ranting a long, unintelligible monologue, indistinguishable amidst the soft roars of crashing waves, the muted glare of the monitor enlightening a bit of her lively features.

And there was Sasuke, cautiously standing three yards away from her. He was clearly not inclined to approach her, since it would be awkward to disrupt the woman's prattle. But the fact that the Uchiha was there, apparently interested at whatever she was doing, spoke more than a thousand images.

And on the eight day, Sakura was just being her usual self while arranging the scattered frame boards on the table and encrypting the newly scheduled shifts for their director in the midst of a busy afternoon.

Everyone in the vicinity expected Sasuke would stay indifferent to her existence, not minding that she was already shutting off her tiny PC.

But to their surprise, he paused, turned to the self-assigned subservient personnel of his, and nearly touched her shoulder with a steady hand...

If only Sakura hadn't swerved her head, astonished at first, then quickly turned into that pleading look while uttering another sincere, "Sorr—"

His hand, a mere blur to the naked eye, retreated to his side.

"Thank you." Sasuke slanted his chin to a slight nod, and left her befuddled and speechless.



★ *make-out*

Uchiha Sasuke was never late.

It was already 10:50 PM to be exact, and everyone was shivering due to the light, freezing drizzle that rained upon their heads and colorful parasols. The glaring spotlights were all still lit, almost flooding the whole coast with a bright, blinding light.

Beside her, Ino chattered her teeth, wearing a thick raincoat over her thin bikini. Those skinny arms were wrapped around her own shivering frame, while standing beside Sakura under her dark green umbrella.

“Sakura, where is he?”

“Who, ah, Hyuuga-san? He’s drying his hair—”

“No, idiot,” she angrily snapped. “Chicken-butt.”

With a jerk, Sakura started. “How should I know?”

“You’re practically his assistant for the past few days.”

“Eh?”

“You should treat me to something once you get a raise, forehead,” Ino grumbled instead, as she continued to stare at the traces of raindrops, like small torn meteors descending on the now damp sandy earth. They created crater-like and footstep-shaped puddles, filling up with the murky waters for about two minutes until someone finally called.

“Scene 51, Junko and Tetsuya, get ready.”

Soon enough, the whole personnel scampered to prepare for the shoot; *kantoku*-san arrived with his impeccable appearance still intact despite the rain, but he was emitting this kind of frustration that was palpable like the heavy downpour of the summer rain.

“What happened?”

Everyone was asking the same thing, as the gargantuan overhead lights were in place, the crane cameras were ready to roll, and he sat on his usual chair in front of the monitor with his eyes almost boring large holes onto the screen.

“Haven’t you heard?”

Ears behind a curtain of bubblegum pink prickled.

“On *Swirly News*, Naruto-kun announced that Itachi-kun just arrived from a recent film festival. It seems he won an award and was now hired as the head editor of this movie, maybe Uchiha-taicho—”



Sakura didn't hear the full details though, since the checkered, white board suddenly snapped, stupefying everyone in an uncomfortable tense atmosphere.

"Take one, scene 51, action."

Ino now stood on the stand, her bare feet burrowing on the coarse clumps of sand. It was absolutely what the audacious, mulish Junko felt: boiling with frustration; with her lead actor Sai, both of them looking absolutely soaked right to their very own freezing marrows.

The icy combination of rain and wind weakened her shivering body, and Ino struggled to keep her lines from warbling.

"This heart of mine would burst, an emotion so uncontrollable—"

"Take three, scene 51, action!"

Snap.

"Consume me."

"Take nine, scene 51, action!"

Snap.

"I can't hold it any longer."

Snap.

"I love you with—"

"Stop."

It was only after the tenth NG when he then said bitterly, "One stupid line."

They were blunt yet cutting, clear yet low and he hissed in fury, "You can't even say a simple *I love you*."

Sakura had always dreamed to hear those words, which should be filed with honey sparks and brownie nuts, from the gorgeous Uchiha Sasuke—but now, she thought she had never heard those three words uttered so maliciously.

Every tendon in her body coiled, her blood almost leaving her petite body. And she felt the urge to cower but when she saw her best friend's cornflower eyes brimming with tears of aggravation, Sakura decided to step in.

"How would you know?"

Because even if she had devoted her life in chasing something impossible—to even at least gain Sasuke's notice, so that she could hope—she would never let anyone trample her idol, her best friend-almost-sister because of misplaced anger.

"It's not something easy to say in front of—"



“You don’t know anything.” The condemning jeer intended to injure, his mouth was grim, making her feel like she was lower than anything.

“But—”

“Know your place.”

“I don’t care about where my place is!” she shouted, her temper flaring.
“Understand our own place! We’ve been standing here waiting for you for hours!”

The others merely watched with held breaths, expecting the terrifying Uchiha Sasuke to say another scathing word. But then, he merely tore himself from his seat and walked away.

Leaving fifty people behind, who stood unmoving with their mouths gaping in confusion.

Sakura heard the loud bang of metal doors, sounding so ominous all over the place, and couldn’t help but sigh when there was an apparent fray inside. The sound of things being scattered and of closets being emptied were unmistakable.

She should run after him. She should stop him.

But instead, her feet were rooted to the now empty set, she stayed with Ino, who stared blankly at her feet with a defeated expression on her face. And Sakura felt her heart sink, slightly glad that the crew was gradually thinning, leaving them in the comfort of the privacy they needed.

“Help?”

And Sakura gave her best smile, as she crossed her legs on the sand.

“When you say this, it shouldn’t sound like a declaration. It was never meant to.”

She closed her eyes, and imagined that he wasn’t just a face on a screen, that he was just an ordinary man. That the boy who she—*dare she say love? she doesn’t know*—was still there, had never lost his smiles that had caught her heart. A possibility that maybe, maybe, she would see that again, a one-in-a-million chance in that reality.

“It should be desperate. Because it’s true. Because he will never, ever believe it.”

She reached out to touch the side of Ino’s cheek, mind wandering to a different skin, nearly transparent, more pallid than anything and as rough as the whitest granules of sand...

And she mouthed the words, too low for the tempestuous sky to hear, too soft for Ino to understand why it hurt, why she was too afraid to speak them out. Because she knew that all of them thought her actions were ridiculous, but this wasn’t just some silly—



“Say that again.”

He was there.

Turning around, there were his steely mercurial eyes. His hand was fisted over a crumpled piece of paper, his unruly hair flat and stuck to his jaw.

But she knew him (he was not there because of guilt—it was not *because of her*), and it was unrealistic. She trembled, aware that she should obey his order, but how could she say it to a man whom she only met, that she had always watched him from afar, that she just wished—

Junko still tried, didn’t she?

So she said it, again.

It came out in a whisper, and she couldn’t even take away the desperation from her voice. But it was loud enough, despite the wailings of the sea.

“I love you.”

And the droplets of rain seemingly decelerated to a stop, the numbness overpowering her senses. And Sakura remembered the rainbow smiles, and rainy laughter, and snowy tears, and all that romantic clichés, and breaking hearts. She felt that the whole world hush to catch that simple line, delivered earnestly in spite of her drenched form and aching, burning muscles. That she wasn’t acting, that there was no set, no lights, and no foggy lenses. It was just him, him standing in front of her maladroit form, flushed with fever, rasping throat, and that unexplainable scalding beneath her eyes.

“Yamanaka-san.”

And the spell shattered at the sound of his deep voice calling out another’s name.

“...Yes?”

“Practice that delivery.”

“Of course.”

And as Sakura realized that the tenuous snaps reverberated in her chest, she knew that it was impossible.

Ino showed up with a box of sweet-scented tissues, entering the small cubicle where assistant PAs were supposed to take their breathers. With a single glance, that darn starlet said the first thing that made her wish the ground would just break open and swallow her up.



"Sakura." Without the makeup and the usual cynicism from Ino, Sakura thought her friend was absolutely gorgeous. Maybe this was the reason why she was so undesirable, having a beautiful best friend. "You're so stupid."

"Am not." There was a deep intake of breath, shuddering and in near tears. She tried not to sniff.

"Yes, you are." Though the blonde was pretty furious, the creases of worry were apparent as she handed the pink-haired woman the patterned wipes for her snot. "I saw what you did. You—"

"I didn't confess," Sakura was absolutely livid, her throat strained as she protested with a sharp yell, throwing another Cadbury wrapper to the trash bin. "I was trying to get...into the scene."

There was something comforting in Ino as she half-engulfed her in a one-armed hug. "It's supposed to be only some useless idolizing-worship thing. You just can't fall for someone like him. You *know* that."

"I know." But how could she tell Ino that she just couldn't dictate her heart? Maybe she was insane. The heart might know reasons that the reason may not, but there was no reason in insanity. Maybe. There was no need to explain why. "But it's different."

"How do you know it's different?" It was a recriminating statement. "Sakura, you'll get over this. This unhealthy obsession should stop, alright? It's not love. You finally see what he is! That's why I thought—"

"Is this why you brought me here?" Her usually mellifluous voice was now garbled, punctuated with sniffles. But her accusations were true. "To make me feel stupid? To make me realize that?"

"Perhaps." Ino only made a simple, little grin that told her she still belittled her. "Why do you even like him?"

"I don't," Sakura said truthfully, "I don't."

"Well, I better get going." Getting up, Ino added, "Cheer up."

(you'll forget about him soon enough.)

"She'll be alright, guys." Sakura almost rolled her eyes, as the intended whisper was a bit loud because of the silence that lingered outside.

The next day, everyone was quiet about the different feel in the air whenever the lowly Haruno slave and the high and esteemed Uchiha were in the same room. Sakura was trying her best to ignore him, not knowing that there were almost a gathering number of eyes that spared her a glance. They stared longer at Sasuke, who was sitting tensely while holding the run-through script, since the page he was reading remained unturned



for an hour. All of them waited to catch him if he would acknowledge the presence of the seemingly depressed woman.

It was too bad that the efforts of the whole staff were wasted. Sasuke was good in sneaking glances.

☆ *end credits*

“And, cut!” yelled their very robust clapper loader, he snapped the board with a ringing finality, “That’s a wrap!”

Sakura finally disentangled the flimsy bandanna knot at the back of her head, using the cloth to wipe the last remnants of perspiration. She then dusted off the sand from her shirt as the crowd cheered and congratulated each staff with a job well-done. Her soothe hands were grasped firmly by tens of other people, inviting her for a drink or dinner to celebrate.

But she couldn’t bring herself to answer anymore.

“Naruto.” She could hear Kakashi’s voice over the din of chatter. “I know, we’re already finished but—”

“Hah, I’m still in-charge of the promotional clips; so pay up with some ramen!” Then, as if remembering something, the blond added loudly, “Sasuke’s interview will be on air in about five minutes. I think he finally arrived earlier, he’s probably in his trailer resting for a while.”

Should she—?

She mentally scolded herself as she contemplated on mutilating her feet when she found herself standing in front of a white door; the characters of kantoku taunted her as its definite strokes were like a knife to her body.

It always never hurt to dream before, but she knew that it was because of it that she lost sight of what actual things were; making her disillusioned that she could have a chance.

Her fist was over the door, ready to knock.

She could hear his television buzz softly, making her realize that it wasn’t probably a good time to say something.

“Come in.”

Sakura stilled, but knowing that she had no way escaping now, she complied.

Pushing the sway door open, she entered the room. The lights were off, but she could easily see his shadow outlined by the brightness of the screen, sitting on a single recliner couch with that familiar cowlick contours defined so clearly.



“Uchiha-kaichou.” Her voice was soft, trying to make this as formal and detached as possible. “I’m really sorry about the other day and—”

Her feeble voice was overwhelmed by the ongoing conversation on the show, as he amplified the volume.

“I guess...” She sighed. “I caught you in a bad time, I’m sorr—”

“Sakura.”

She had always thought that her name was simple, generic, plain and unnoticeable to the sea of glamour and prestige, among the millions of other souls who could be more worth his notice. But when he said it in such a way, she felt a tremendous rush of warmth, like those forgotten summer chimes that she used to listen to when she drank bittersweet teas and ate oven-heated cakes.

Then, she finally noticed what the television was blaring about.

—are your plans after the movie? Your brother was planning on working on another movie, but is there—

“Where’s the script?”

—there’s something that I want to see on film. But for once, I want to do it—

“Script?” she said dazedly.

And she nearly felt his urge to roll his eyes, but she was confused at the way he was expecting, waiting for something. *“I have an ambition and I don’t plan—”*

“—to leave it as a dream.”

Sakura couldn’t help but be mesmerized in awe, as he uttered that familiar statement. It was the opening phrase of a fragment of an unread tale, written arbitrarily in a moment of fervor, by some foolish little girl whose whole life hanged on high, high tenterhooks and unrealized dreams. “You—how did you—”

He propped his arm over the head rest, slanted his head a bit as that single coal iris looked at her.

“Really?”

And Sasuke-kun, as her traitorous mind tenderly called him, smirked.

“Idiot.”

He then turned his attention back to the small screen.

But his hand was there, open, and with a little ounce of bravery that she had and with the slivers of tears in her green eyes, she closed the distance with one step, dug her hand on his palm and held it as firmly as she could.

And as she felt his fingers clasped loosely over her whitened knuckles, she felt that this was all she had ever wished for.



Rockstar

Sasuke had wanted to be a rock star since he was three. He took guitar lessons, bought himself instruments with his own money, wrote lyrics, trained his voice. He perfected his brooding, badass image. He kept his hair spiky, his skin pale and unblemished, his expression carefully stoic. His music was of the head-banging, screamo variety. His clothes were black. He owned a leather jacket. All to make himself the biggest rocker sensation since... *anyone*.

That was why he so respected Kakashi, his agent who had found Sasuke, strumming his acoustic guitar and singing under his breath on a bench at the park one evening in the summer after high school ended. The (slightly) creepy, (mildly) eccentric, (very) strange man had loped up to him, mask covering half his face, headband over one dark eye, and said, "My eardrums aren't bleeding. Wanna make money, kid?"

Sasuke had worked with him for the next three months, training and preparing for his debut. He had left home, turned down his acceptance to his top-choice college, and trekked across the country to wait with Kakashi for the day he would finally, *finally* get to sing.

Never had he regretted his decision as much as when he got his chance.

"You want me to be lead singer for a *girl band*?"

Kakashi smiled, seeming very pleased with himself. "You've been waiting for your debut, haven't you? And bands get bigger fan bases than solo artists, anyway."

"A girl band," Sasuke repeated, more slowly. "As in, with females."

"Don't be sexist, Sasuke," Kakashi chided. "They're a very talented girl band."

Sasuke had to resist the urge to pull at his artfully messy spikes of hair. Kakashi wasn't *worth* his beauty. Anyway, Kakashi had to be kidding.

"I'm not kidding," Kakashi said suddenly. Sasuke stared. God, but that was creepy. "It's all been cleared. All you need to do is sign the contract, and you can start next week."

"I don't *want* to sign the contract," Sasuke grumbled, folding his arms across his chest.

"I thought you wanted to be a singer."

"I do."

"I thought you loved music."





“Yeah, but—”

“I thought you quit school, left your family and city and only friend to pursue your passion.”

“I *did*, but this isn’t—”

“This is your big chance, Sasuke. Do you really want to let it go?”

“...”

“Didn’t think so.” Kakashi beamed. “You can leave tomorrow morning. I have your ticket all ready. First-class, too!” When Sasuke continued to glower, Kakashi reached out to pat his head condescendingly, which only served to make him scowl harder. “Don’t look so down, Sasuke. They’re all very pretty.”

Yeah. Like *that* helped. His reputation was already going down the toilet.

“Who are they, anyway?”



“I believe they call themselves...” Kakashi coughed. He wouldn’t look at Sasuke, and he took that as a bad sign. “The Konoha Winonas?”

“I hate our name,” Sakura complained.

“I hate *your* name,” Karin said. “I also hate your face, your voice, your hair, and your existence.”

Sakura gave her a very flat look, spat her wad of watermelon gum into her palm, leaned over, and stuck it on Karin’s elbow.

“Ew!” she squealed, waving her arm until the still-wet gum fell off and to the ground with a *splat*. “Sakura, you freak!”

“Play nice, children,” Temari sighed from her spot in the corner. She was flipping through a magazine, looking very bored.

The three of them were waiting in their studio for their new lead singer, scheduled to arrive some time in the next hour. The band’s fourth member, Ino, had gone to pick him and his agent up from the airport. Sakura and Karin, who couldn’t stand each other on the best of days, were only crankier when hungry, and poor Temari was left to mediate their every interaction.

So it was really no wonder when Karin threw her guitar pick straight at Sakura’s forehead. Sakura narrowed her eyes, wadded up her sheet music into a ball, and threw it at Karin.

“Why don’t you *quit*, then? We like actual talent.”

“Well then, you better get packing!”

“Talentless skank.”

“Spice Girls reject.”

Sakura gnashed her teeth together, obviously trying to be—or at least look like—the mature one. Temari wondered, idly, why Karin was even *in* the band with Sakura. They had always hated each other and, clearly, always would.

She didn’t ponder for long, however, because Ino suddenly appeared through the door at the far end of the room. She was wearing a face-splitting grin, which Temari understood only after she had stepped aside to let in their new singer. Even Temari, who had a fiancée she loved very, very much couldn’t keep her jaw from dropping. She had never seen so perfect a specimen. Dark hair spiking up in the back, bangs falling into equally dark eyes, contrasting with alabaster skin and high cheekbones. He wasn’t smiling—actually, he looked downright *pissed*—but it worked for him. Behind him was his agent, equally interesting to look at with his shock of gray hair and mask.

Temari turned to call for Sakura and Karin’s attention, but their screaming match had escalated to the physical.



“Ugh, *whore!*” Karin screeched, getting to her feet so she could kick at the legs of Sakura’s stool. Caught off-guard, Sakura had no chance to try and balance herself, and she toppled over with a shriek.

“Karin, you bi—”

Sakura broke off suddenly, the words dying on her lips. She looked up from her spot sprawled on the floor, propped up on her elbows, and finally spotted their new singer.

“Oh my God,” Karin breathed.

Ino pursed her lips. “What a first impression,” she said, glancing apologetically at the two newcomers.

“We’re not always like this,” Temari added, hopping off her stool and tossing her magazine aside. She held out a hand to the singer, then his agent. “Hey. I’m Temari, percussionist.”

“I’m Kakashi,” the agent said pleasantly. “You’ll have to excuse my client, he’s sulking.”

The singer brushed his hair out of his eyes. “I am *not*.” He turned to Temari. “I’m Sasuke.” He nodded at Ino in greeting, then Karin, then his gaze dropped to Sakura, still on the floor, still gaping.

“You can get up now,” Ino said with a laugh, holding her hand out to her best friend. Sakura stumbled, then burned red. “She’s backup vocals and bass guitar,” Ino said to Sasuke. “I’m Ino, on keyboard. And that’s Karin, she—”

“*Lead* guitar,” Karin cut in with a sickeningly sweet smile aimed at Sasuke. He didn’t look impressed. “I write a lot of the music. We’ll probably be working together a lot.”

“With me,” Sakura said, stepping up. Ino and Temari watched, bemused, as she tossed her long roseate hair over one shoulder. “I do lyrics.”

For the first time since they had met him, Sasuke’s expression changed. He twitched, then scowled.

“I write my *own* lyrics,” he snarled—literally, much to everyone’s disbelief. Sakura actually stepped back, startled, before frowning.

“Not anymore you don’t,” she snapped. Sasuke’s brows furrowed, but she continued, “You can offer input, but that’s about it.”

“I am *not* singing your stupid love songs.”

“You don’t have to! We don’t *sing* stupid love songs.”

“Yeah,” Ino said, “They’re pretty smart.”

She went ignored.



“And besides,” Sakura said, “We’re just fine without you, you know. I was lead singer before you came. I can go back to it!”

The room fell silent. Sasuke’s eyes were narrowed in thought, while Karin was glaring, quite openly, at Sakura. Ino looked nervous—she knew as well as Temari did that Sakura couldn’t go back to singing anymore. But before either of them could intervene, Kakashi stepped in.

“Can’t we all just get along?” he said, putting a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder. “Sakura, please forgive him. He doesn’t know how to talk to pretty girls.”

Sakura was obviously caught off-guard by the unexpected compliment. Sasuke looked to be a cross between embarrassed and furious, and he shrugged off Kakashi’s hand—rather violently, Temari thought. Hopefully Sasuke wasn’t going to be too much of a diva. Karin was all but baring her teeth at Sakura. Ino seemed to notice this as well, because she exchanged an amused glance with Temari.

“We’ll discuss lyrics after the tour,” Ino said soothingly. Her words only seemed to alarm Sasuke further.

“Tour? What?”

“Well, this has been in the works for the past *year*...” Temari shrugged. “Sorry, we can’t push it back. If it wasn’t for the accident, we could get to know each other. As it is—”

Sasuke blinked. “Accident?”

The tension in the air seemed to increase. Sasuke was at a loss, but his eyes were on Sakura, who was determinedly staring at the floor.

“It’s nothing,” Ino said finally, breaking the silence. “Look, the tour’s starting in a week. Let’s discuss this over lunch, hmm?”

Sasuke folded his arms across his chest in a gesture not unlike Sakura’s when things weren’t going her way. Temari recognized it, and stepped up.

“I’ll order,” she said. “Pizza okay with you all?”

Sasuke scowled at his agent. “I hate you,” he said very calmly—then stalked towards the door.

Diva, out.

His image was ruined. He was singing girly lyrics (“I’m unusual, not so typical, way too smart to be waiting around!”), wearing girly clothes (Ino wouldn’t let him wear his worn-out leather jacket, and his shirts were all *pressed*), and had a girly fanbase (mostly hormonal tweens). Pretty soon, Sasuke would have his own perfume.

He shuddered at the thought.



It was the morning after a late concert, three weeks into the tour. The rest of the band was still asleep, and probably would be until after noon, but Sasuke, unable to sleep throughout the night, went down to the kitchen at 10—an ungodly hour to be up, in his opinion, especially after getting home at nearly five in the morning.

Still, he was up, he was bored, and the remote was conveniently lying on the table. Shaking the box of cereal, he hit the power button and saw his face, eyes closed, mouth to the mic. Ah, a video from the night before.

As he poured in his cereal, a woman in her early twenties came on screen. She was wearing a tight shirt and horrendously bright lipstick. Sasuke turned the volume up.

“The Konoha Winonas were on fire last night, and much of that can be attested to their hot new singer, Uchiha Sasuke, and all the drama he brings! Rumors have been flying around about the singing sensation and his bandmates—particularly Haruno Sakura, ex-lead singer of the band, and Karin. The two guitarists were seen exchanging heated glares as they danced about their new star. Sasuke acted oblivious, of course, but not even he could be ignorant of these two lovely ladies! Fans everywhere are alternating between mourning his single status, and debating over who Sasuke will wind up with.”

As Sasuke watched, growing increasingly disturbed, the images on the television shifted from a video of the concert the night before to a shot of Sakura and Karin, posing for a magazine cover, side by side. Karin was crouched down, hair spilling over one shoulder, while Sakura was leaning against a wall, one leg propped up against the seat of a chair. Both of them were holding guitars.

“On one hand is Sakura, who appears to be the favorite for Sasuke’s affections. Sunny, smart Sakura used to be the lead singer of the Konoha Winonas, and she won our hearts as quickly as Sasuke. But can she win his? Rumor has it that Karin, lead guitarist and one-time-model isn’t so easy to ignore. Can Sasuke really resist such a diva? Don’t be so quick to judge, because a fan shot some interesting footage last night...”

Sasuke scoffed, pouring some more milk into his cereal bowl. When he glanced up again, mouth full, he nearly choked.

On screen was a shot of him leaning against the limo, Sakura trapped against him. Even as Sasuke watched, his on-screen self leaned down, eyes half-closed, to Sakura’s cheek.



“It seems this boy’s choice has been made. Some fans, however, remain skeptical. If you’re going to pick one, Sasuke, make it soon, and make it clear. We’ll be waiting.”

Sasuke stared at the TV, jaw sagging, as several more clips were shown, the band’s hit song *Rockstar* playing in the background. He had only been pulling Sakura out of the way of her fans, then leaned down to her ear so she would be sure to hear him.

They hadn’t been doing... whatever it was people thought they were doing! Sasuke barely *knew* the girl, didn’t even really like her that much...

It was ironic that just as Sasuke was thinking this Sakura came in, still in her dark blue flannel pajamas, hair in disarray. Obviously, she hadn’t known Sasuke would already be up—Sakura was usually an hour before anyone else.

Just as he had suspected, she blinked when she saw Sasuke, then flamed red. “Sasuke! I—what are you doing here?”

He gestured to his uneaten cereal wordlessly as explanation.

“Oh. Right.” She laughed, then glanced at the television where, thankfully, the show had just ended. “Anything interesting on?”

Her question brought back memories of the horror he had just seen, and Sasuke was mortified to feel his cheeks warm. Dammit, he *was* turning into a girl!

Sakura glanced back at him curiously, reaching for the cereal.

“Are you okay?”

Just peachy. Some rockstar he was, getting flustered over a stupid rumor. Then again, he wasn’t really a rock star yet. Just the night before, he had been singing about walking a little faster in the halls, just to get next to his crush. It was *painful*. Something had to be done about the lyrics. They were really much more suited for a female singer.

Then again, Sakura had been the lead singer for the band before him, hadn’t she? What had changed, Sasuke wondered.

“Can you pass the milk?”

Sasuke complied, passing her the carton silently. When she took it, her fingers brushed his. Sasuke hated himself for noticing. His image was *dead*.

But there was only a little more than a week left of the tour. Then, maybe Sasuke could leave the band, and start over. He would just be a new name... and a new face.

“We’re doing pretty well, hm?” Sakura mused, nibbling at a piece of dry cereal. “Thanks for helping us.” She smiled at him.

“Hn,” he grunted. “It’s a temporary thing.”



She stopped smiling. “What? Why?”

Sasuke looked at her like she was an idiot. “It’s a *girl band*,” he reminded her.

“So?” Sakura demanded. “What’s wrong with girls?”

“Nothing,” he said. “But you’re too soft for me.”

“Soft?” She scooted closer to him, chair legs scraping against the tile. Sasuke watched, shocked, as she lifted her shirt so he could see her belly. He averted his eyes.

“My belly button, prude. It’s pierced.” She dropped her shirt (Sasuke cursed himself— why was he getting so worked up? He should’ve *slept* with a hundred girls by now!). “My ears?” she said, pushing the hair back from her face so he could see the three piercings in each lobe, as well as the one in her left cartilage. “Pierced! I’ve pierced my tongue, my nose, *and* my eyebrow. I dyed my hair monthly as a kid. *And—*”

Her hand went to the collar of her shirt, and Sasuke realized what she was going to do too late.

“I have a tattoo,” she said, yanking down her collar so he could see a spiraling symbol just above her left breast. “From university. What do *you* have?”

Sasuke didn’t speak. He couldn’t. He stared down at the pale patch of skin she was exposing to him, alarm bells ringing wildly in his mind. This was not *possible*. The pink-haired, goody-goody spokesmodel of *the Konoha Winonas* was more hardcore than him? That was wrong on so many levels. Not the least of which was that she was *still* flashing him! Well, almost-flashing. Kind of.

Sasuke coughed, forcing himself to look away. It was surprisingly difficult. “Your sound, it’s...”

“It’s *what*?” she asked, straightening out her shirt and returning to her breakfast. Sasuke didn’t know how to reply, and she finally sighed, setting down her spoon, and said, “Fine. Whatever. I’m sorry I snapped. You’ve been really great, and I—” She shook her head. “We’ll discuss music tonight. I can’t promise you much for this tour, but let’s see how things go. Maybe I can convince you to stay.”

She smiled at him again, and Sasuke thought once more of the show he had watched.

Dammit.

“Maybe you can,” he said. But that was just to be polite.

Sakura was a bit of a coffee-addict, so after she showered and dressed, she and Sasuke left the band’s hotel suite to search for a nearby café. Eventually, they decided on Starbucks, each getting a coffee and settling in a dimly-lit booth at the back of the shop.

Sakura clicked open a pen and flipped open a notepad to a clean sheet. “I’ve been wanting to use the line *You were my dream come true—*” Sasuke made a face, and she broke off. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”



Sasuke plucked the pen from her fingers. “Why don’t you step away from the love songs for once? Let me try something.”

“Like what?” she asked, clearly skeptical. “‘People suck, go die’? Ooh, catchy.”

Sasuke frowned. “What’s *wrong* with you? *I’m* the singer, aren’t I?”

Sakura seemed to sink in on herself, expression dropping and eyes dimming. Sasuke wanted to kick himself. What had he said?

“Fine,” she said in a soft voice, pushing her notepad across the table. “Go ahead. I’ll stop.”

Sasuke took the notepad, pen poised to write, but made no move to pen down a lyric. Instead, he remained watching Sakura. Her hair was slipping over one shoulder, still damp from her shower. The sun was slanting in through the window beside them, highlighting her pink hair orange, her green eyes indistinguishable in the light.

“Why don’t you sing anymore?” he asked.

Immediately, Sakura reacted, reeling back in shock and staring at him with wide eyes. Sasuke remained watching her patiently, waiting for her reply. She wouldn’t look at him for a long moment, worrying her lip, until her shoulders finally sagged, and she sighed, long and slow.

“I damaged my vocal chords,” she said quietly. “I *can’t* sing.”

Sasuke stared at her. She was staring down at her mug, expression unreadable.

“It was pretty sudden,” she said. “It happened about two months ago. I saw dozens of doctors and specialists, tried every kind of treatment. Nothing worked. We almost had to break up the band—and just before our tour, too. We were about to make it big.”

She looked up, then. Her smile was sad.

“Part of why I was so stubborn about the lyrics was—well, they were *mine*. I was supposed to sing them, not you. And I hated you for taking my spot from me.” She laughed. “I was wrong, I know. I’m just... childish.”

They were both silent for a moment. Then, Sasuke spoke up.

“I heard your old sound,” he said. Sakura looked up, surprised. “You were good. I can... understand. Why you’d be bitter.”

He cleared his throat and looked away from her, pasting on a scowl for good measure—which was when he saw the camera focused on them, held by a seedy-looking man in the corner booth. Shit. Paparazzi, and he was catching Sasuke being *nice*! Something had to be done.



Sakura remained oblivious to the camera, and she reached out to touch Sasuke's hand. She was smiling, cheeks blooming with color. Dammit. Why did she look so *pretty*?

"Thanks, Sasuke."

Sasuke didn't like that she kept smiling at him like that. Or, rather, he didn't like that he *did* like that she kept smiling at him like that. He was no pansy. He was a hardcore punk rocker. He didn't get mushy over a girl's *smile*.

"Sasuke? Are you okay?"

That stupid show had started this mess! Now everyone would think he was into Sakura solely because of her smile or... or something equally pathetic. No. He couldn't do this. He needed to be tough. He needed to protect his image.

The camera was still trained on him, and Sakura still hadn't seen it.

"What's your tattoo of?" Sasuke asked abruptly.

Sakura blinked, pulling at her collar, just as Sasuke had hoped she would. "It's of my university's symbol," she replied. "Why?"

"No reason," Sasuke said. And then he reached out to trace his fingers over it. Sakura looked startled, but the cameraman looked thrilled. To him, it looked like Sasuke was going in for the grope.

The flash went off, Sasuke spent a moment imagining tomorrow's headlines—Bad Boy Uchiha is at it Again!—and then, satisfied in his knowledge that he was just as much of a pervert as any other boy, still worthy of his rocker title, he leaned down and kissed her.

"It's over, ladies. It seems that heartthrob Uchiha Sasuke doesn't realize just how desired he is—not if the tender way he was snuggling up to Haruno Sakura over coffee this morning is any indication. The boy's in love! Isn't that cute, girls?"

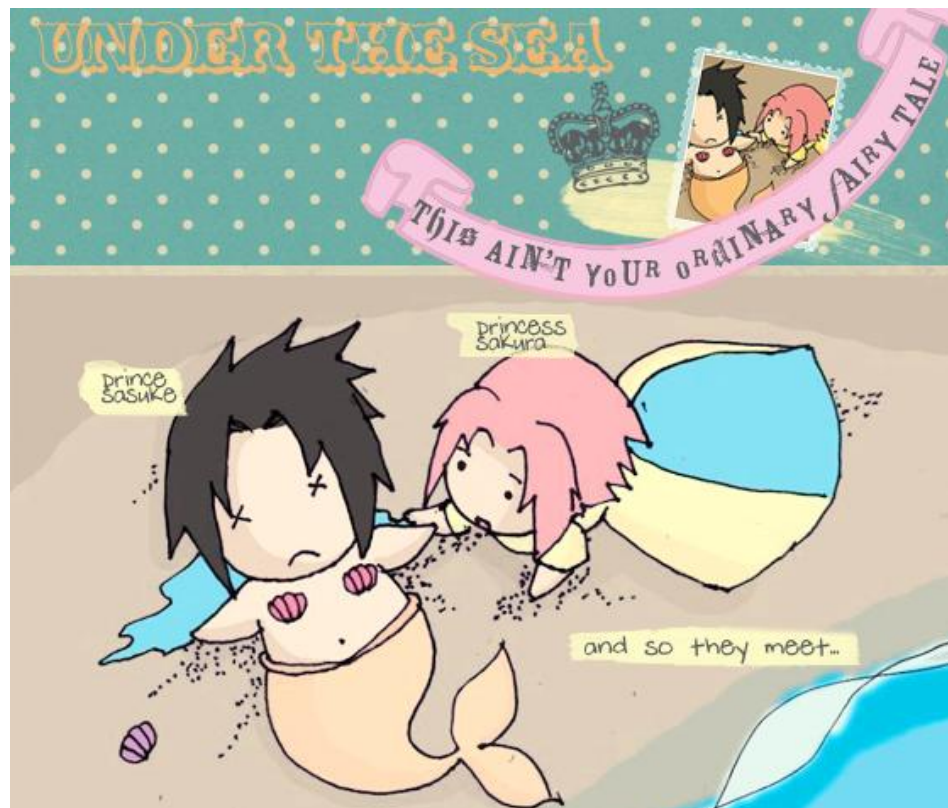
Sasuke threw his TV out the window in an emo-rocker move that would make even *Pain* proud.

Under the Sea

I n the absence of reason, one's only recourse is laughter.

"My seashells are itchy."





Hyuuga Neji looked at Uzumaki Naruto with thinly-veiled disdain. The blond boy was fidgeting, almost bouncing—as well as one *could* in the depths of the sea—in place with his agitation. *His behavior is not becoming of a merman of his ilk*, Neji thought, as he pushed up from the ocean floor, and cut through a passing school of clown fish. His long brown hair seemed attuned to the rhythm of the ocean's flow—it followed his movements with little coaxing—and acted as a makeshift banner that announced his comings and goings with all the pomposity of a court herald.

Naruto snorted.

"Oi, *princess*! Don't go too far! Shikamaru and that bastard are supposed to be here any minute! And didn't you hear me? I said my cups were kind of itchy—maybe they're infected or something! Couldn't you check?" The last he said with unrepentant glee, anticipating the other's reaction to his request. Neji was such a frigid little bitch, sometimes. He really made it too easy.

"Maybe you're lactating," Neji replied snidely, using sarcasm in lieu of sympathy. Where the hell were Sasuke and Shikamaru anyway? They should have known by now that leaving him alone with Naruto for more than five minutes never led to



anything other than trouble.

"Nope, that's not it," Naruto said, unaffected by his implication. It was what he expected after all, though he wished the Neji had been a bit more violent with his distaste. Naruto had been hoping for a few popped blood vessels at least. He sighed, disappointed.

"Why'd that pervert make us wear these anyway? We look like applicants at one of those skeezy brothels he loves visiting so much."

After taking another look around in hopes of seeing Sasuke's and Shikamaru's approaching forms—and finding himself wanting—Neji pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed heavily.

"You shouldn't refer to Jiraiya-sama in that manner, Naruto," he said wearily, as though he was reciting from a book of etiquette. "We've told you that time and time again. As to your question, I could not venture to guess what makes Jiraiya-sama so adverse to seeing male nipples"—at this, Neji crossed his arms over his own baby pink seashells, in order to keep his modesty—"which was the prime reason he had the particular piece of legislation you are referring to drafted and passed by the Tribunal. You would know all this if you had ever bothered to read *any* of the required texts for our History seminar." At this, Neji gave Naruto another meaningful stare, which he hoped would aptly convey both his own superiority and his disapproval of Naruto's lackadaisical ways.

"Well I kind of get *that* part—"

"Doubtful," Neji interrupted blithely. Naruto barreled on as though he hadn't even spoken.

"—but what I *don't* get, is why they have to change colors to match our mood! Isn't that kind of girly? And plus, I look really really washed out when I get pissy—emo blue isn't my favorite color and, you know, that's more of the bastard's schtick, am I right?—so why couldn't he just have them stay the same color? I look *awesome* and *fierce* and *unstoppable* in orange, and it really brings out my eyes, I think. Don't you? And you can't tell me that you don't honestly wish that yours was your power color *all the time*. I mean, that would basically be the equivalent to you having your own theme song, you know, or like, having accompaniment for your freaky hand-hair. You and baby pink—it just *works*, Neji. It *empowers* you."

Neji was saved from retorting by the timely arrival of one Nara Shikamaru. The latter's movements as he swam to meet them were stark, almost jerky—a wild contrast to his usual laconic strokes—and the line of his back was stiff with tension. There was an unease in his eyes which gave his friends pause.

Neji noticed the difference immediately, and tensed, bracing himself for the worst.

"What's wrong?" Naruto asked bluntly, never one to circle the coral reef.

Shikamaru did not seem surprised at the question, and he answered without



hesitation.

"His bed was empty this morning, and there were signs of a struggle," he said, without preamble. "That framed family portrait he has up on his wall? You know—the one that his mother painted? It was on the floor. The glass case around it was shattered. They found a trail of pinkish fluid on his carpet. It led out into the gardens from his balcony."

"Blood. Was it blood, Shikamaru?" Naruto asked, speaking almost breathlessly, as though the speed at which he spoke would make the refusal come that much quicker. He released a breath when Shikamaru shook his head in the negative.

"Tomato juice."

"His customary midnight snack," Neji murmured to no one in particular.

"That's why I was late," Shikamaru said, as though they'd asked for an explanation. "They had me check his usual haunts but—"

"He's gone, isn't he," Neji interrupted blankly. It wasn't a question.

Shikamaru nodded.

"Yes. Sasuke's been taken."

There was an octopus head hanging over him, and if there was an octopus head hanging over him, it meant that he'd failed.

But then, Uchiha Sasuke thought dazedly, it doesn't look like any octopus I've ever seen before. It was unlike the large yellow one that functioned as a popular attraction in the royal carnival, and its arms were too short for it to be the same species as the gardener that trimmed the hedges outside his window (and, now that he noticed, it seemed to be missing a few arms as well).

Perhaps it was a new specie.

It certainly doesn't have eyes like any octopus I've ever encountered, Sasuke thought, squinting blearily. *And why is the light so bright? And why am I so dry?*

He shrugged these inconsequential thoughts aside and examined the blurry form before him with some trepidation. If this was, indeed, a new species, he would have to take care not to arouse its ire. Who knew what sort of tricks it had under its tentacles?

And again, Sasuke asked no one in particular, *why the hell are my eyes so dry?* He blinked once, twice, but to no avail. The figure above him seemed half-cloaked in shadow, but from what he could tell, it was oblong by shape and a pale-peach in color. The creature's posture seemed different somehow—less boneless, and more upright—but Sasuke was willing to bet his prized pet barnacles that there was an octopus head hanging over him, potentially waiting to unleash its unholy fury on his hapless merson.



As such, he did what any dignified princeling well-trained in the art of combat would do when placed in the same situation.

“*RAAH.*”

Instinctively, he turned to swim away, moving his lithe lower body in the sharp jerking motion that had won him a sparkling First Place at last year’s Water Sports Ballet Competition, only to realize that in lieu of water, he was surrounded by sand.

Which meant his earlier assessment had been wrong.

He hadn’t failed.

“...Where...am I ashore? *Octopussycat*, I made it—I made—”

He froze as he heard an answering giggle, and tensed as he felt the answering weight of a small hand resting against his right cheek. The picture above him seemed to clear, and he gaped openly at the bright green eyes that met his surprised gaze.

“Hello there,” the creature said lightly, parting its lips to reveal even, white teeth. “Are you feeling all right?”

Sasuke took one look at her...

And promptly threw up.

“But who would take him? Who?”

Neji seemed to consider the question with all due concern, swimming back and forth so quickly that it began to make Naruto dizzy.

“The real question is,” the blond said, shaking his head to clear it of its daze, “Who would *want* him?” His earlier concern over Sasuke’s welfare seemed to have disappeared, and in its place rested the assurance that Sasuke was simply off sulking over who-knew-what. Naruto was firmly of the opinion that he’d be back by nightfall.

Probably.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

He wilted slightly at the thought that he might be wrong.

Shikamaru shot Naruto a dark look.

“Be serious, Naruto. Sasuke’s disappearance has dangerous implications for the rest of us. He slept in a room that was heavily guarded, and fortified by the best security measures known to our kind. Not to mention, he’s an able fighter and more than capable of protecting himself.”

Neji paused in his motions, and threw Shikamaru a Look.



“He was a...competent warrior, Shikamaru. But let’s be fair. There were—are—better than he. You needn’t be so concerned about the safety of Atlantis’s constituents. After all, I—” He was cut off by Naruto’s (not-so-)accidentally (well-)placed fist.

“*Anyway*,” he said, drawing out the word so it became more of a sound rather than a word, “enough talk. How are we gonna find him with all those goons raiding the crime scene? We’ve gotta look for clues, don’t we?”

“I thought you didn’t care what happened to Sasuke, Naruto,” Shikamaru said lightly.

The blond flushed pink.

“I *don’t*,” he screeched. “But that jerk owes me next week’s lunch and I’ll never get it if we don’t find him alive!” He swam away from them, and huffed irritably, crossing his arms across his chest.

Neji, who’d been glaring at him with ill-disguised contempt, stifled an inelegant snort. He then proceeded to adjust his pink clamps with all the dignity he could muster. Shikamaru merely shook his head.

“You don’t have to explain, Naruto—Neji and I already know all about your little ‘romance’. It’s nothing to get snippy over. We know that you two aren’t doing what got He-Who-Must-Not-Even-Be-Thought-Of expelled from the kingdom three years ago. *Really*.”

“Or, at least,” Neji put in, smirking, “you two aren’t doing it with electric eels, lampreys, and sometimes angler fish.”

Naruto shot them both a glare that could have frozen icicles.

“Let’s just find him.”

Haruno Sakura stared.

She tried not to—she knew it was rude, and she’d had the Rules of Propriety bored into her skull by a team of highly excitable tutors since she could burble, but it was so difficult not to stare.

The boy in front of her had ink-black hair, and skin like ivory—and that was rude too, she remembered distantly, seeing people as objects; but honestly, she’d never seen those shades (naturally) reproduced in any living human before—and his chest rose and fell with steady breaths. His eyes were shut now, and a most uncharitable part of her wished it would have been all right to wake him up—she’d always judged people by their eyes, after all, and his own seemed shut to the world. His nose was thin and straight, his chin strong and aristocratic. All-in-all, he seemed a lovely package.

But that wasn’t what kept her staring.

From the hip-down—and she tried very hard not to blush, she’d seen diagrams



before after all, and helped out in the castle's healing wing whenever things got too busy—the boy before her was covered in a fine sheen of what appeared to be fish scales. They shimmered in the light of the morning sun, glowed iridescent and lovely, and cast a soft rainbow across the line of her arms.

A real, true, merman.

She boggled at the implications.

There were *mermen*. The folk tales were *real*.

Somewhere, in the ocean in front of her, underneath the waves which lapped against the shore, beneath the tides that ebbed and flowed with the moon, there was an entirely different world apart from the one she'd always known.

At the thought, Sakura paused, wondering if she should have been a little more apprehensive about being alone with the magnificent specimen in front of her. As she sat beside his prone figure, she tried in vain to remember if there were any particular dangers associated with the mermen of the deep. Mermaids, she knew, could be as ornery as any proper sea urchin, their voices clearer than the lightest of bells. *They* were dangerous, those Sirens. And then, she knew that there were variations—again strictly of the female variety—which fed on the flesh of drowned seamen in order to maintain their youthful beauty.

She spared a small glance down at the creature lying beside her, her eyes confirming once-and-for all, that despite the orange seashell pasties, it was decidedly male.

Probably.

Sighing, she went back to her ruminations, before she stopped at the sound of a low groan.

“*Oh,*” she gasped softly, kneeling over him when she noticed some movement behind his eyelids. “He’s waking up!”

She watched as he shook his head from side to side, and *finally*, he opened his eyes to reveal a shade that matched the darkness of his hair. He blinked slowly, as though unaccustomed to the sunlight—which, now that she considered it, might not have been too far off the mark, considering his presumed origins.

His eyes seemed to flicker between a sort of consciousness and what she assumed was his dreamscape. She listened, more than a little amused at the way he seemed to take careful notice of her bright pink strands, but the giggles disappeared when he wondered aloud whether she was a previously undocumented specie of octopus. He seemed disoriented, surprised to be ashore.

“Hello there,” she ventured, pushing a wave of annoyance away in favor of reaching over to touch his face—still smiling—when his ravings had ceased, and his throat seemed to have exhausted itself on what she assumed was his battle cry. “Are you



all right?”

She was more than a little disconcerted when she got a nose full of vomit for her courtesy.

Sasuke retched, feeling more miserable than he could remember as the feel of regurgitated sea scallops made itself perfectly at home in the blue-blackness of his hair.

The figure above him moved away, the voluminous folds of its strangely poofy pale yellow-and-blue garment—*And, what is under it*, he wondered. *A cave?*—rustling with its fluid movements. He squinted, and tried in vain to sit upright, before succumbing to the feel of exhaustion seeping through his limbs. The stench was becoming unbearable now, and—

“Here you go,” was his only warning before the creature above him allowed a handful of water to plip-plop its way into the center of his self-made mess.

He shot it a glare in lieu of thanks, and began the arduous process of flopping on his stomach to drag himself to the water.

He would wash it off without its—he still wasn’t quite sure what *it* was—help, so help him.

What was important was that he was here. He was *ashore*.

He’d made it.

Now, he thought, Madara will pay.

“I just had a thought.”

In an effort to be the bigger man, Shikamaru let that one slide. Besides, it would have been entirely too easy, and they were too busy for him to be spending any time entertaining Naruto’s witticisms.

Neji, it appeared, had no such qualms.

“Enlighten us, Naruto,” the young lord said absently as he watched the rhythmic movement of the manta ray above him. *Its perfect symmetry is truly something to behold*, he marveled silently. Even the smattering of spots—

“We’ve checked the entire kingdom, and the Grand Pervert’s sent out his best swimmers in a fifty-mile radius. And, we still haven’t found him.”

Shikamaru sighed wearily.

“Where are you going with this, Naruto?” he asked, running a tired hand through his hair.

The blond looked contemplative.



“We’ve looked in caves, under fault lines, behind coral reefs—”

“—and in that trollop sea-witch, Karin’s, cave,” Neji interjected, shuddering at the memory of her dreadfully fast hands.

Naruto scowled at his reaction.

“At least she didn’t sic that weird skeleton on you,” he raged, swimming faster so he led the group, and then turning so he faced them. Shikamaru groaned as *again*, they were forced to stop.

“Where’d she get that thing anyway? It must be new, I didn’t see it last week when I stole those anemone stingers to put in the pervert’s bed...*anyway*! We looked inside his favorite abandoned ship wreck, and below that one hole on the palace grounds he ran away to that one time Jiraiya tried to make him ma—”

“We remember,” Shikamaru said weakly, going green at the memory.

“My favorite hair tie is still covered with sea moss,” Neji added darkly. “And shrimp intestine. Sasuke’s propensity for regurgitation during times of trial is most unbecoming—”

“—*of a merman of his ilk*,” said Shikamaru and Naruto in perfect tandem. “We know, Neji.”

“My point is,” the blond continued gratingly, annoyed that no one had seen where he was going, “isn’t it possible that—”

He was interrupted at that moment by the arrival of Udon, one of the younger palace guards. The boy was red-faced, as though he’d been swimming a relay.

“My lords,” he said, as soon as he reached them, even as he panted for breath. “There’s been a development.”

Naruto, Neji and Shikamaru watched as he huffed.

And puffed.

And snortled a little, sending a spray of bubbles toward the light above.

Naruto slapped a hand over Neji’s mouth before he could deliver what Naruto knew—from personal experience—to be a yawn-inducing monologue on *The Particulars of Decorum Befitting a Meryouth of Your Station*.

He’d been fortunate enough to be the recipient of Neji’s...goodwill before, and really, after the 463rd time, the thing tended to be a burden to sit through.

Shikamaru, for his part, ignored all this and prodded the boy to hurry with his information.

“You were saying Udon?”

“My lords,” the boy tried again, “the investigators—they’ve found something!”



Silence reigned.

“We rather got that,” Neji said pointedly. “Or else you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

The guard seemed to wilt under the Hyuuga’s obvious displeasure.

“They—they—”

“Spit it out, child,” Neji thundered.

Behind him, Naruto mimed choking, allowing his eyes to bulge more than what was strictly appropriate.

Or natural.

“*It was staged*,” Udon yelped out.

“...”

“...”

“...”

Three brows quirked in succession.

“*Excuse me*,” Shikamaru said blankly. Neji’s attempt at indifference was marred by the way his thin brown eyebrows seemed to twitch for further clarification.

Naruto, for his part, gaped openly.

Udon continued as though he’d expected these reactions, clearly more at ease now that Neji’s superciliousness had been replaced by (well-hidden) confusion. He pushed his goggles further up on the bridge of his nose.

“Prince Sasuke! They think that he—*he planted all that evidence*! When the detectives went through his room for more clues, they found a map of *Konoha*! He’s *up there*. On land! The investigators aren’t done analyzing everything quite yet but they found some stuff about, you know, *the accident*, and they think that he’s up there, because, well—”

He trailed off, noticing the dawning comprehension on the three faces in front of him. Lord Nara’s had darkened with understanding and Lord Uzumaki’s mouth seemed to have tightened at the corner.

It was Lord Hyuuga, however, who made him shiver.

“He wants revenge.”

“That’s a very pretty bracelet, Sasuke-kun.”

He grunted at the sound of his name coming from *her*—at least that mystery had been solved—lips, and turned away as he swam out further into the sea, fingering the



silver metal on his wrist with disdain. After a few laps, he returned to where she stood and raised his voice just so, enough that he could be heard above the lapping waves.

“Without it, prolonged exposure to your filthy human air would render me helpless within a matter of moments,” Sasuke said tonelessly.

Sakura took no outward offense and shrugged before she sat down on the shore, arranging the folds of her ridiculous garment around her so that they shielded her skin from the sand.

“Oh,” she said simply. “Well, if you’re so tired of it here already, why don’t you leave?” Those eyes, the color of his air at dusk seemed to pierce through him. Irrationally, he wondered whether he’d somehow hurt her with his curt dismissal of her home. *Stupid*, he told himself forcefully. *She’s no one but a stranger. And she’s one of them.*

“I’m looking for a certain man,” he said instead. “I have unfinished business with him, and I’m looking for information.”

She blinked, clearly confused.

“A man? You, that is—a *man*?”

He sighed in exasperation before answering her unasked question.

“He used to be...like me. But,” he continued, and here his voice grew lower so she had to strain to hear. “He changed his form—masked it, rather—so he would look like one of *you*.” Now, there was no mistaking the sheer amount of hatred in his voice. “He wronged me, and I would right this wrong before I allow him even another *breath* of your putrid air.”

Sakura blinked.

“What did he do? Borrow your favorite pasties and not give them back?” she said laughingly, gesturing to his orange seashells.

His cheeks flushed, and his eyes narrowed.

“If it pleases you to laugh so, I should at least be kind enough to give you a proper reason,” he said mockingly.

Sakura gestured for him to continue, still smiling.

Sasuke closed his eyes.

“He killed my family.”

“So,” Naruto began, after Udon had sped away, and they were alone with one another again. “I, uh, never actually got what...happened. With the, uh, massacre. Except, you know, the...*massacre*.” He cringed at the reminder.



“Which part?” Neji said blankly.

“You can’t tell that story in pieces,” Shikamaru said.

Naruto laughed, but it rang hollow.

“Heh. *In pieces.*”

Sasuke drew in a deep breath, and began.

“I was born the second son of a noble clan. From the beginning, it seemed the stars were determined to cross. That Fate was set on destroying what meager happiness she saw fit to grant me. It was a frigid day in the seventh month in the eighth year of my—”

“Um,” Sakura interrupted.

“...What?”

“I was just—could you maybe—I mean, it’s just—”

“*What?*”

“I know that your story is tragic—there’s no way it isn’t with the introduction you gave it—but—I mean, I just—tell me without the dramatics, ok? I’ll be honest—I have a hard time taking you seriously when I feel like you’re channeling Shakespeare or something. You know what, actually? I’m sorry, I won’t say a word. You tell it the way you want to. It’s, ah, your tragedy, after all.”

At the end of her awkward tirade, Sakura waved her arms in a mute—and ultimately uncouth—supplication for pity. The last thing she wanted was to hurt his feelings. *He seems the prissy sort*, she decided silently. It was in the way even his hair seemed determined not to sway with the balmy breeze, as though the very strands knew the repercussions of falling out of their assigned places and onto the otherworldly beauty of his delicate face. Even the softly-accented words he spoke—halting, awkward, slightly antiquated—seemed to mark him decidedly different.

She wondered if he rolled out of bed—*schlepped? drifted?* What was the right term here? Sakura didn’t know—that way, even despite the water he had presumably grown up surrounded by. He certainly seemed imperious enough that even Logic would yield to his reign.

“Who is Shakespeare?” was what he said in response.

Sakura stared.

“Never mind,” she said, shaking her head. “You were saying?”

He gave her an odd look, but continued, evidently willing to allow the comment to pass.



“My brother, cur that he is, was born at high tide, which where I am from, is a sign of auspicious fortune. From the beginning, he had *everything*—respect, admiration, adoration. And why not? He was the first-born, the heir to the throne. The ladies of the court found his facial features agreeable and pleasingly symmetrical—”

“—so he was pretty,” Sakura ventured. *Is he usually so loquacious*, she wondered. He didn’t seem the type, but then, what did she know about him? He was a stranger. Perhaps it was something in the oxygen.

In any case, Sasuke looked pinched now—his nose, scrunched in distaste, and his dark eyes were narrowed. Sakura strongly suspected the look was his default.

“THE LADIES OF THE COURT FOUND HIS FACIAL FEATURES AGREEABLE AND PLEASINGLY SYMMETRICAL, and he was a master in the states room as well as in the practice range, which made him popular with both the up-and-coming mermen and the well-established hierarchy of influence. As a result, he wanted for nothing. When I was born, I was deemed ‘spirited enough’ and ‘intelligent enough’ and ‘handsome enough’. In short, it was a well-kept secret that I was second to him in *all* ways that mattered, least of all in terms of ascension to the throne. My mother doted on me—”

“Ah,” Sakura said, nodding understandingly. “Oedipal issues. So your kind has that, too? And, oh my—you’re a prince,” she said, and marveled accordingly. She allowed the smile on her face to grow past the realm of “polite interest,” and into “appropriately awed”. All the nobility she had ever met had always preferred it if she’d made a fuss over their status. Hopefully, this extended to sea princes, too.

To her dismay, Sasuke’s scowl only grew deeper.

“...Do you make a habit of mocking other being’s pain? And of course, I thought that would have been obvious. Tragic or not, I’ve been told by many that my bearing is regal enough.” He sniffed pointedly, and Sakura felt the first stirrings of exasperation.

“Yes, well,” she began crisply. “Those people haven’t seen you with half-eaten scallop in your hair.”

“Itachi left to go on land right?”

Shikamaru favored Naruto with a glance as he replied.

“Yes. He felt that he had explored all possibilities here, and that there was nothing left to know, to discover, here under the sea. To that end, he left, seeking opportunity for growth elsewhere.”

“But along the way,” Neji continued, his voice growing so cold that Naruto was surprised icicles hadn’t yet formed in his wake. “He met with the wrong *kind*—not that there are any *good* ones up there, mind you—and indirectly engineered the death of his



family.”

“Indirectly,” Naruto repeated, clearly befuddled if the way his blond brows met in the middle of his forehead were any indication.

“There are rumors that he was...helped along on his decision,” Shikamaru put in. “A mysterious third-party manipulated him. That’s what’s in the records anyway, and the council is unwilling to implicate him any further. You remember how much they adored him.”

Naruto snorted, sending a spray of bubbles in Neji’s general direction.

“There are theories—just *theories*—that this third party, whoever it was, told Itachi that his family was the only thing holding him to this place, and with the obliteration of his line, he would be free to live. Freer to live,” Shikamaru amended hastily. “Sasuke was spared only because his parents had decided to make that trip their second honeymoon without telling him. They left him without saying goodbye, you know.”

There was silence for a few dark minutes, before Naruto cleared his throat, uncomfortable with the sudden quiet.

“But Itachi wanted to live as a *human*,” he said, shuddering. “Why? They’re *gross*.”

“Perhaps he just wondered what *different* felt like,” Neji mused. “And in any case, one commonly wishes for what one does not have—in this case, it is quite possible that Sasuke’s brother wished for an entirely different way to live.”

“So, he didn’t want to be a merman anymore?” Naruto said, trailing off.

Shikamaru snorted.

“Exactly,” he harrumphed. “From what I’ve read, it’s not very easy. There are all sorts of problems. War, pestilence, plague. Those people are trouble, mark my words. It’s hot and dry. They live to work and eat and die and—”

“—they don’t ever really live, not the way we do,” Naruto said in a small voice. His tail drooped noticeably behind him. “Is there a cure for their humanity?”

Shikamaru shook his head.

“Not as far as I know.”

“Well, it sounds like a really bad place to be. I’m glad we’re here.”

“Humph,” Neji said, as close to an agreement with Naruto as he would ever get.

“Let’s just get that idiot back down here before he gets any ideas. You know how badly Sasuke wanted to be just like *him*.”



They were sitting on the beach now, a few feet away from where she had found him in order to spare their olfactory senses the fragrant scent of his stomach acid. She was certainly a strange one. For a brief moment, he wondered whether she was considered so eccentric, even by human standards. Her voice was clear and strident, and almost never sank down to the level of a whisper. The closest it had come was the sound of it before he had first woken up—the soft sudden break through his hallucination. What had passed for octopus head in his reverie was actually quite smaller than he had first thought, and looking at her now, he wondered how he could have made the mistake. The only thing that seemed out of proportion was the breadth of her brow, and even that was minor. At first, her eyes had reminded him of the bottles humans threw into the ocean after—what he'd read—their nights of revelry, so he should've hated the shade. However, in the light of their sun, he imagined them lovely and clear: the color of kelp. Her skin was near to his own pale pallor, though it was a warmer shade. She was dressed in yellow, which should clashed spectacularly with the coral of her hair—and it did, really, but he couldn't quite fault her for it.

It would not, however, stop him from telling her.

"Your strange garb and your strange hair are burning my eyes. And what is Oedipal, anyway?" he asked, trying his best to pronounce the strange word in the same way that she had.

Sasuke watched, amused, as her pink lips thinned, and her eyes began to twitch. Neji did the same thing whenever Naruto used his favorite ceremonial hair ribbons to shine his seashells. Unfortunately, the resemblance stopped there, and there was no explosion of decorum. Instead, she smoothed her face out into a more pleasant mask and smiled gratingly.

"I feel somehow that we have gotten off-topic," Sakura said easily. "You were telling me about—*oh!* Do you...want to stop? You don't have to tell me anymore if you don't want to. I haven't been my best today, and well, I'm not usually this insensitive, I promise." She looked away, embarrassed. Her cheeks were pink.

"Do you have sunburn? Your cheeks are pink," he said in what he hoped passed for concern. He lifted a finger, poking at her left cheek experimentally, and marveled at the way it seemed to bloom pinker under his ministrations.

She scowled, and batted his hand away.

"Stop that!"

He desisted, and looked out to the horizon.

"In answer to *your* question," he said pointedly, "I have been told that releasing my anger in this manner will help me to *heal*. As a result, I have been forced to tell my story so many times, and in so many ways that I long ago came to terms with the way I...*feel*, after." *That is to say*, he added silently, *that I know I feel something, but I don't exactly know what. But I am certainly not telling you any of this.*



He looked at her to gauge her reaction, and in lieu of the mask of tears he had been dreading, he saw faint traces of softness. This was a surprise. Where were the half-hearted condolences, and the false streams of pity? He'd grown so used to staying stoic and silent, as around him, his brethren seemed to fall apart whenever he told his story—looked to him for real comfort in the face of their superficial tears, in lieu of making any attempt to consider his place in the tragedy.

It was so very exhausting watching others fall apart, but to his surprise, there was no pity on her face—only a calm curiosity mingled with a hint of sympathy.

The change was...refreshing.

"You—"

"I don't actually know what to say."

Sasuke scowled, all gratitude gone.

"Hasn't anyone ever told you that it's rude to interrupt when your betters are speaking?"

Her eyes glittered dangerously, and Sasuke found himself reminded of that brightly shining thingamabob he'd cut his tail on that one time Naruto had pushed him into his super secret cave of hoarded thingamajigs.

"Well," she began sweetly, as she arranged her skirts around her so they seemed to form a fan in the sand.

Unbidden, Sasuke felt his hackles rise.

"Perhaps if I saw any around me," she continued, "I'd be more obliged to take your graciously offered advice."

"Are you always so...the way you are?"

She pretended not to notice when he "accidentally" used his flipper to send sand, and a few dead hermit crabs, onto her skirts.

"And how am I?" she asked, fluttering her lashes.

Sasuke studiously ignored her.

"I imagine you don't see creatures like me very often," he said, turning away to face the ocean.

"I'm still not completely convinced that you aren't a hallucination," she said softly.

"Should I throw a barnacle at you again? It seemed to do the trick a few moments ago."

"—and starfish, and sea turtles, and dolphins, and coral reefs, and those squidgy



fish with the squishy faces I don't remember the names of, you know, the ones that blend in with sand near the playground, and—"

"*Shut. Up. Now.*"

Shikamaru resisted the urge to smack Naruto with the nearest piece of ship debris.

"I realize that you are quite opposed to Itachi's methods and madness and motivations, but you don't have to list down *every* little thing you love about being down here. Neji's already gone through three recitations of the most recent amendments to our national constitution just to keep from strangling you."

Naruto looked on in wonder—whether it was over Neji's self-restraint or the way he'd been systematically dismantling pieces of the warship they'd run into, Shikamaru wasn't sure.

"Why aren't we looking for him, anyway?" Neji asked. He'd stopped stripping away the layers of paint once all sides were evenly discolored, and now floated, looking speculatively at the algae still covering the stern.

"Yeah," Naruto agreed. "Why aren't we?"

"We've been ordered to remain here. The council elders...they don't want to risk another *accident*."

"They were *mowed down*." She gasped, clearly horrified. What sort of monster...his own parents!

Sakura was appalled.

"In cold blood. I believe he was...water-skiing. At least, according to my research notes that is what it I believe it is called. Riding on air with two sticks on one's feet, while a whirly-whir boat pulls it for momentum. The spinners on that boat continued full-speed ahead, despite my mother's frantic pleas for it to stop."

Suddenly, he looked at her, angry again. The orange seashells on his...chest...were flashing red, a far departure from the bright orange they had been prior.

"My sources told me that your human authorities,"—and here, he spat the words as though they were distasteful—"did not even bother with an official investigation. They simply deemed it an accident—said some words about 'dugongs' and 'manatees' and 'conservation efforts'. My distant uncle, who manned the ship, simply paid a fee," he finished tonelessly. "Is there a price for your humanity in this world?"

The question seemed to be rhetorical, and in any case, Sakura had no answer for it. His parents—sea royalty—mowed down, mistaken for sea cows, and relegated to a file in Greenpeace's case cabinet.



She wondered now, at Sasuke's composure—at how many years it had taken him to achieve the level of grace he was displaying now. Besides the lack of inflection in his voice, there seemed no sign of what Sakura was sure was his turmoil. The entire affair was preposterous—vaguely absurd.

It would have made her hysterical.

"You said something about a distant uncle," she said, more as a distraction than anything else.

"He had long ago renounced our world manipulated my brother with ideas of immortality."

"Immortality," Sakura repeated. "How in the world—"

"While my kind lives longer than your own, we are not invincible, nor are we truly immortal. When we die, we turn into the foam of the sea. He caught snatches of a rumor that would allow him not only freedom from the foam, but also a chance to soar in the sea above. My brother, fount of ambition that he was, was enthralled. My uncle, who escaped the sea through sorcery, fed this rumor with lies and trickery, convincing my brother that the fastest way to avoid death was to do away with my parents. When my brother found out, he was devastated. All of this, I know from hunting and gathering information below."

Sakura was silent, reflecting on the story she'd just been told. It was all so fantastic, so unbelievable and so impossibly untrue. If she didn't know better, she would have suspected a hoax. After all, it reeked of clichés, and fairy tales, and she was a practical girl—despite her frilly, yellow and blue petticoats.

But then, when she looked at him to question his truth, she could only notice the strained tenseness of his muscles, the telltale tightening of his jaw, the way his fists clenched and unclenched rhythmically, almost in time with the crashing waves.

What reason would he have to lie to her? He hadn't asked for anything besides information, hadn't seemed to notice the weighed pearl that rested in the pale hollow of her throat. He hadn't even bothered to address her by her name—hadn't given any indication that he even knew what it was, or even that he cared.

As crazy as it seemed, she believed him. And what was more, she was sorry for him, though she had a feeling that to show that would be tantamount to a death sentence.

Or, at least to an *epic* fit of pique.

Still, she could not, *not* say something.

"I'm so—"

"If that's the beginning of an apology, don't even bother," he interrupted curtly.

"...It's very difficult to be kind to you. Do you know that?"

He didn't seem apologetic in the least.



“I hate apologies. Useless things—what could you have done, anyway? How could you have known? Silly creature. If you’re sorry, give me resources. My guards are searching for me, and they’ll find me soon. I would exact my revenge before supper.”

Sakura heard nothing past the word “creature,” and found her sympathy quelling in the face of her mounting irritation.

“I am a *girl*, you imbecile. It is *one* syllable. Surely your...your *mermish* tongue can handle pronouncing one unfamiliar syllable. You seem to have a handle on other far more complicated words, anyway.”

“Of course I do. And, of course it can. It simply chooses not to.”

“Tragedy or not, I am starting to dislike you,” she said tartly, though the soft smile on her face belied the venom in her words.

He turned away, and she was gratified to see his own face blooming in the dark.

“The feeling is mutual, you impertinent sea slug.”

“Lord Nara, Lord Nara!”

Udon was back, and he seemed to have learned from his former faux-pas. He kept his eyes carefully lowered as a sign of respect, until Shikamaru—who was rolling his eyes from where Neji couldn’t see him—gave him lead to rise. The young guard was careful not to allow his exertion to show, and made a point to depart from the palace grounds at a far more sedate pace than he had earlier. As a result, the huffings and puffings and snortlings from earlier were replaced by a relatively calmer, cooler delivery of news.

Neji harrumphed in hard-earned approval. His hair, which fanned out behind him in its customary resting position, seemed just as appeased, and made no move to attack. Naruto was fascinated to note that the tendril-like, vaguely malicious “appendages” it had grown during Udon’s last less-professional appearance were nowhere to be found.

“What is it, Udon? Any news?”

The boy bobbed his head.

“Yes, milord. The sea gulls nearest Konoha’s western-most coast have reported back. They’ve spotted the prince ashore. There’s someone with him, though. A pink-haired—”

But they were already gone.

“Sakura...thank you.”

She quirked a pink brow, and Sasuke felt his face burning. He’d have to apply



some nacre when he got back home, he decided. This perpetual sunburn couldn't possibly be healthy.

At least, he thought it was sunburn. It was gone *now*, at any rate.

"One minute I'm an *impertinent sea-slug*, and the next, I'm worthy of your gratitude. What brought this on, Your Highness?"

He threw her a glare, before turning away to face the sunset. He hadn't realized how long he'd been there, talking to her—couldn't imagine what had led to his sudden fit of chattiness. Still, he couldn't take back his words.

"I've heard...stories," he said grudgingly. "Of what your people do to mine, when you catch one of us. You sell us to the highest bidder—use us for entertainment, or as objects of fascination."

"I haven't yet discounted the idea," she said wryly, though he knew—with a reliable degree of certainty—that it was all in jest.

Probably.

They were quiet for a while, and Sakura shifted so she was lying parallel to him—an arm's length away, not that he was measuring. The sky was darkening now, a blotted mix of coral pinks and anemone oranges.

He felt her shift beside him, was suddenly conscious of the small, pale hand that crept closer to his side, but not near enough to touch. That curious warming sensation was back on his face, and he frowned. The sun was disappearing—surely, it couldn't be its heavy burn, *again*.

"Is there a time limit on your bracelet?" she asked him, her voice growing softer, her breath turning into its own whisper. Her eyes seemed to disappear behind her lids, and he wondered now—silently, so she wouldn't hear—how he'd ever managed to mistake her for an octopus.

"My main concern is when my brethren will come for me. I can," he said, looking away now, so she couldn't see his face. "I can come back at any time, though. Assuming they don't place me under lock and key after this. Now that I've found my way here, they'll have to lock me up if they want to keep me away. From the information," he amended hastily, in case she got any ideas. Not that she should have, because he certainly wasn't.

Stupid girl.

"Mm. I hope not," the girl murmured sleepily. The wind lifted a lock of her hair so it fell across his own shoulder, and Sasuke resisted the urge to slap the tingles away.

"Stupid girl," he said again, aloud this time, though he made no move to wake her when she began to snore lightly. He lifted his hand to brush the errant lock of hair away from his shoulder—the tingling *refused* to let up, and how was *he* to know that she hadn't given him some oddly fragrant, lavender-scented, human sickness, what with the



way his face refused to stop *burning*—when he heard a sudden shout in the distance.

“*SASUKEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE-CHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAN!*”

Sasuke sighed, irrationally disappointed, before raising himself to lean on his elbows. He knew the sound of idiocy when he heard it. Frowning, he looked at the girl beside him. Her hands were curled into small fists, her eyes were shut—fluttered only slightly every few moments—her breathing was deep and even.

She was asleep.

He found himself almost hesitant to leave her—this *girl* with eyes the color of algae, and hair the color of coral. She’d listened, and hadn’t fawned over him—hadn’t offered trite reassurances, or paltry altruisms. There were no grabby, twitchy, hands, or salivating, gaping, maws—in short, she was nothing like any of the other mermaids of the court.

And, she was leagues away from that harlot Karin, with her disgusting tentacles and her gleaming red eyes.

For a few moments—but only that—Sakura had even made him forget his anger.

He’d try again tomorrow, he decided, as he began to swim out to meet his companions. After all, somewhere, Madara roamed, and Sasuke’s body would not rest until *He* met His end. Sakura, as surprisingly un-unpleasant she might have been—and really, he was still reserving judgment—would not change his course.

Still, he decided, it would be nice to see her when he came up for his jaunts, and she was amusing enough at the very least.

And maybe she was a little charming. *Maybe*. He wasn’t quite sure, yet.

Sasuke swam harder, battling the rising waves with fluid ease. He wished his thoughts could be silenced as easily.

From here, he could see Neji’s disapproving frown, Naruto’s impatient jabbering, and Shikamaru’s tired yawn.

Hm.

Then, he stopped, turned around, and swam back to shore, ignoring Naruto’s indignant squawks.

There was something he needed to do first.

When she opened her eyes, she was met with blue.

Instantly, she shot up, and looked around. The scent of saltwater—so pungent yesterday—seemed to have dissipated to its normal levels, and she felt irrationally disappointed.



“A dream, then,” she said softly, as though the lack of vehemence—of volume—behind the words would make them less true, would assuage the sudden, biting disappointment.

She stood up gingerly, and brushed the sand away from her dress. Her muscles ached from sleeping on the sand, and she wondered why no one had thought to look for her.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said to no one in particular, moving slowly back toward the village. It would do her no good to stay here, any longer.

She took small steps, reluctant to leave the site of her whimsy, but stopped abruptly when her foot nudged something cold and metallic—quite unlike the grains of sand that were abundant on the shores around her.

A bracelet—silver in color and hauntingly familiar—seemed to wink at her in the sunlight. Beside it, written in what would have passed for a child’s shaky hand, were the words

High Tide.

Slowly, biting back the smile that threatened to engulf her face, Sakura bent over to pocket the bracelet, and brushed the words away with quick, efficient strokes. When she finished, she continued along her way, her steps quicker, and decidedly more focused. She would bathe quickly, and dress warmly, and explain last night’s absence—hopefully—with little incident.

She had a date to keep, after all.





Once upon a time, there lived a simple girl who loved unconditionally and a complicated boy who survived a tragic past, subsisted in a torturous present, and faced a bleak future. In all the countless iterations of their star-crossed meetings, there was always something left unsaid, always something left undone. Be it distance or time that formed the unassailable chasm between them, these stories, touched by the dark, the somber, and the melancholy, come together as fractured fairy tales.



ECTO

Haruno Sakura was running—there was a skip in her step and a song in her voice, an unrelenting enthusiasm coloring the way she saw the world as she mapped out her bright future in her head. She felt like nothing, *nothing at all*, could go wrong.

‘Doctor Sakura...’

She was going to celebrate, throw a party, pig out, light fireworks, and all of her friends and acquaintances would be invited, hell maybe even her enemies (Sasuke-kun’s junkie friends) too, if only for the chance to gloat—the presence of her name on the list of accepted students warranted nothing less.

‘Doctor Sakura Haruno... Doctor...’

Not only would she be studying in the most prestigious university in all of Japan, but she would also be studying in the most prestigious university in all of Japan *with Sasuke-kun* (who, despite having his brain cells fried by various questionable substances acquired from a shady character named Kabuto, still managed to pass the exams with minimal studying, flying colors, and a confident smirk). Of course, they would be studying different courses, but what mattered was that they would be together again after years of being apart; and maybe *maybe*, she could manage to worm her way into his heart this time. It was too bad, however, that Naruto was not able to make it, but it wasn’t like she didn’t expect this. There was just *no way* to get into Tokyo U by just sheer will alone, no matter how strong the said will was. Sai wouldn’t be able to accompany them either, what with him earning a scholarship in an art school. But at least she would be *alone* with Sasuke, just Sasuke—no Juugo (whom she would have found tolerable had he not been bipolar), no Suigetsu, and no Karin. It was practically the perfect set up for romance! Sure, she was being a bit *lame*, practically building her future around a guy she loved—but hey, at least she would be learning how to save lives by doing it!

‘Doctor Sakura Uchiha! Perfect!’

Jubilant, she threw up her hands as she gave out a whoop of pure victory.

‘Today is the first day of the rest of my life.’

She was going to Tokyo U, and nothing—nothing—was going to stop her.

Nothing except fate, that was.

It was probably her fault more than the driver’s—and ultimately, it was she who suffered the worst of consequences.





Trapped in a haze of careless happiness, of blissful ignorance, Sakura failed to notice the traffic light turning green, did not hear the blaring honking of a horn, did not see the red car careening towards her, did not even understand that it was her whom all the people were screaming for.

And the last thing she remembered was white, blinding pain.

“Oi, forehead girl, you better wake up, we’re supposed to go shopping this weekend, remember?”

‘Pig—no, Ino... Ino, I really want to go, but—’



“Wake up soon, okay, Sakura?”

“Sakura-chan! Wake up already. It’s been a week and it’s awfully boring without you and ... I’ll... I’ll even treat you to ramen if you’ll just wake up!”

‘Naruto...’

“Oh, by the way, Sakura-chan, Kakashi-sensei’s here with me.”

“Yo.”

‘Kakashi-sensei...’

“Honey, your dad and I have to go on a business trip, okay? We’ll be back soon. I—”

‘Mom... please don’t go...’

“—I really hope you’ll be awake when we get back. We miss you, dear and—”

“And medical expenses don’t exactly come cheap. Now, let’s go, we’re going to be late for our flight.”

‘Dad! You—’

“Don’t be so insensitive! She might still be able to hear you!”

“Tch.”

“Hag, you’re even uglier with pasty skin and sallow cheeks—”

‘Sai, you insensitive jerk!’

“—so I think you should do yourself a favor and wake up.”

“Why can’t—Why do you always have to be so *damn* annoying?”

‘Sasuke-kun...’

“I—I hate you, you know that? I FREAKING hate you!”

‘No... Sasuke-ku—’

“Sakura? Sakura! No—Someone! Someone—Emergency! Someone get in here now!”

“Sir, what happened—“



“I—I—”

“She’s going into—Someone call Doctor Tsunade, hurry!”

“I’m here, what happened here—oh my—Sakura—”

“Dr. Tsunade.. Dr. Tsunade! We need your—”

“Right... Right. Someone, someone begin compressions, you—get the crash cart. Shizune, defib, charge to 300—”

“Is she gonna be okay? Oi, is she gonna be okay! I’m talking to you—”

“What the hell!”

“Someone get that damn boy out for here.”

“Sir, you need to go, I—Is that alcohol I smell—Sir! Have you been drinking? The rules... This is—”

“Just get him out of here.”

“No—No! I’m not going away! I—”

“Then, shut up and stay out of the way, Uchiha! Clear.”

“Doctor, we have to make him leave, he’s—”

“Look, *nurse*, we’re in the middle of an emergency. It’s hardly the right time to think about rules. Besides, he won’t budge, will you, Sasuke?”

“No. I won’t.”

“Then—”

“Just shut up and do your job.”

“I—”

“Alright, ready, clear!”

“No response. Do it again.”

“Come on... Come on, Sakura...”

“Clear!”

“None—”

“We’re already losing her...”

“Then get the Trach—”

“Doctor, her father signed a DNR.”

“I don’t care—she—”



“*Tsunade.*”

“...Right—Right. Just continue compressions then—we can’t...”

“Hey what are you all just standing there for, aren’t you going to—”

“Don’t shout, please!”

“But you’re not doing ANYTHING! Fuck!”

“Uchiha, stop shouting! I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Sir, I’m sorry, but the DNR—”

“DNR means we can’t do anything else beyond this point, Sasuke. It would be illegal.”

“What? No! No—You can’t—”

“Uchiha, I know that it’s hard but—look, I... she’s like a daughter to me, okay, but there’s really nothing more we can do... so try to understand.”

“If that’s true, then you shouldn’t—”

“Doctor, Doctor Tsunade, I’m sorry for interrupting, but you need to call the time of death.”

“No—No! Not yet! You can’t give up!”

“Sasuke... I’m sorry.”

“But—”

“Doctor—”

“Right. Time of death, 6:08 PM, July 23, 2010.”

Sakura felt oddly detached as she watched her own coffin descend into the rectangular hole, white and red roses following in its wake. She stared at it for a long moment, trying to feel some semblance of grief, but the most she could feel was a sense of bitter disappointment at how abruptly her life ended.

‘That’s it? Is that all there is to it? Is my life over now?’

She felt like all her dreams were getting buried with the elaborately designed box that now had tons of dirt piled atop it. Each clod fell with a dull thud, every one of them making her think of the things she would miss out on.

Thud. Family. Thud. Friends. Thud. Tokyo U. Thud. Med School. Thud. Work. Thud. Marriage. Thud. Love. Thud. Sasuke.



The more dirt piled up, the less she could see of her coffin, the container that held her mortal body. Sighing, she turned away from the depressing sight and watched the people gathered around the hole.

Her mother's segmented sobs were resonating throughout the empty cemetery and Sakura could hear her father whispering words of comfort, though his voice didn't sound very convincing either. Her father always seemed like a cold, stoic man, but Sakura knew that he really did love his family and that his gruff exterior was really just all bluster. She could only imagine how much it hurt for them to lose their only child. She felt guilty, too, that she got careless and caused them to feel this grief. But they would be okay, eventually. They would probably just pour all their focus into work, as always. They would be too busy to grieve, and eventually the pain would dull, if not completely disappear. The thought hurt a bit, but for their sake, she certainly hoped it would be the case.

She turned her attention to her friends and classmates. Naruto and Kakashi-sensei were standing beside her parents, looking rather grim. Ino was crying silently as she clutched at Shikamaru for support. Chouji stood at the side, looking rather uncomfortable. Lee had come, along with Tenten and Neji. Hinata was also there, standing alongside Shino and Kiba. Some of her other classmates were there too, even those whom she wasn't particularly close to. Doctor Tsunade was also present, and so was her assistant, Shizune. There were a lot of other people there too, some of whom she knew and some she didn't, which was surprising in itself because she wasn't exactly very popular.

Still, there were some people who were missing.

Sai, for one, was not there. But then, she never did know where she stood with that apathetic boy who called her 'hag' and 'ugly' on a regularly basis. She always thought they were friends despite the name-calling but she supposed she really should have expected this. The guy was a jerk, after all. Besides, he'd probably just call her corpse ugly, and that simply wasn't something she wanted to hear.

Another person was also conspicuously absent, but thinking about it hurt so much that she stopped that train of thought immediately.

Sighing, she closed her eyes and looked away. *'Of course he wouldn't come...'*

But then, the familiar sight of dark hair and pale skin caught her eyes, and despite the grim finality of the ceremony she was currently the subject of, she smiled.

'So we really were friends, after all.'

Sai was sitting on a distant grave, pencil in hand, his tall frame hunched as he sketched furiously over the sketchbook on his lap.

What Sakura could not see, however, was the lone figure standing at the cemetery gates. Unable to take a single step forward, the man clutched at the metal bars



so hard that his knuckles turned white, almost like a prisoner staring longingly at his last hope of freedom as it went further beyond his reach.

“Don’t worry, little girl, it’s not the end of the world.”

‘Yeah, just the end of my life,’ thought Sakura sullenly as she nodded absently and gave her thanks. The other ghosts had come up to her one by one to welcome her into the afterlife. What irked her was the fact that they were all unusually cheerful about the fact that she was dead—it was, it was *morbid*, to say the least, and it angered her beyond belief.

‘How could they even suggest that I should just accept this and move on?’

Sighing tiredly, Sakura plopped down on the grass beside her tombstone and propped her elbows on the cool gray stone, resting her chin on her hands.

Sakura Haruno

March 28, 1992 – July 23, 2010

The installation of her tombstone earlier that day had given her a sense of finality that had been missing on the first few days of her death. At first, it had been surreal. It felt like she was just dreaming. Even as the days dragged on, she felt like she would just wake up anytime in her old room. She waited and waited for her alarm clock to ring, even as the days dragged into weeks and then into months. Still, she clung to hope stubbornly, telling herself that it was inevitable for her alarm clock to ring.

But seeing her name engraved on the polished stone had changed all that.

Suddenly, it occurred to her that her whole life was defined by the time between those two dates. Everything—her birth, her first steps, her first words, her first day at school, her accomplishments, her essays, her exams, her admission to the university, her death—was neatly enclosed by the words March 28, 1992 and July 23, 2010. It was like all the things she did, her victories and her defeats, her joys, and her pains were crammed into that tiny, inconsequential dash between the day of her birth and the day of her death.

Dead by the age of 18—ironic, really. The possibility of death had never crossed her mind. Oh, she knew it was inevitable, but she was never inclined to show concern about it. She was well aware that some people yearned for it. Thinking of it as an escape, they sought death to the point of taking their own lives. But Sakura was never one of them. Life, to her, was a long-term commitment. She had it measured out in decades, her goals marked neatly and precisely in the timeline, all building up to the eventual fulfillment of her own purpose.



Her purpose in life was to become someone worthy of Sasuke—she believed this with such ardent ferocity that she had forgone all those little things in life that a person should enjoy. Friendship, romance, adventure—those had all taken a backseat to her studies, her ambitions, her dreams; and all because Sasuke, the guy she was just crushing on back then, told her (quite condescendingly) that she was wasting her brain on lipstick and dresses.

It was a shocker, mainly because the only reason why she traded her books and pens in for lipstick and dresses in the first place was so *he* would notice *her*. She looked rather plain compared to the other girls, see, and she thought it was impossible for him to actually look at her if she wasn't pretty. Well, it worked, in a way—he *did* notice her, just not the way she wanted him to.

It was difficult for her to ease into the role of 'cute and confident teen', having been a rather shy and awkward child who was prone to being bullied. The only way she really managed to do so was because Ino, who was naturally 'cute and confident', helped her. The whole transition took up a lot of effort for her, especially since she inwardly believed that reading books was far more interesting than combing her hair. She also felt dirty every time she showed prejudice against the 'uncool' members of the school, especially since she was one of them before. But it was absolutely necessary to hang out with the right crowd if she wanted to be *somebody*.

Eventually, she became so good at pretending to be someone else that it became second nature to her. At that point, fate (or rather, Naruto) started to intervene and she actually had several opportunities to interact with Sasuke. And when she actually became confident enough to ask Sasuke out for a date, he simply called her 'annoying' and walked away. She felt devastated. But after a while, she realized that it was okay because, by rejecting 'cute and confident' Sakura, he practically gave her the license to be herself again.

She could be *herself* again—and the knowledge of this made her feel free.

So, abandoning the 'lipstick and dresses' cult and throwing herself into her studies, she gradually shed the mask she had built up over the years and ultimately became much happier.

She allowed herself to admit that, though he had a disgusting tendency to inhale Ramen, Naruto was actually a pretty cool person. She also resolved to be nicer Lee, though she could never really return his affection. Sasuke began warming up to her too, and she managed to build a rather shaky friendship with him. He still called her annoying, but there was something different about it, something that almost seemed affectionate. Spending time with him also taught her that there was so much more to Sasuke than just brains and looks, and this knowledge sneakily crept up behind her 'crush' and turned it into a full-blown 'love'.

All in all, she had not completely found her true self just yet, but she was getting there.



The only problem was that by the time her life was beginning to undergo some real improvements, his had begun going down. She didn't really understand completely how it happened; only that he began to visit the shadier districts of the city more and more often until he actually upped and left her and Naruto, choosing instead to hang out with a rather shifty posse that everyone dubbed 'Hebi'.

It was unbelievable; she couldn't accept that Sasuke, who was smart, handsome, talented, and kind (even though the kindness was buried under a lot of rudeness), would fall so low. The only explanation she could come up with was that he was somehow doing it not because he wanted to, but because he somehow believed that he *had* to.

She resolved then that she would help him. He freed her, so she would free him too.

Except when she did offer her opinions, help, and (quite embarrassingly) her love (her whole heart, really), she was met with a rude rebuttal and an odd speech about the two of them being 'too different' and having 'different paths'.

But then, he also *thanked* her, and that was enough for her to know that somewhere underneath all the bravado, the boy she fell in love with still existed.

She wanted that boy back, and nothing, *nothing*, was going to stop her.

However, to get him to listen, she first had to turn into someone he couldn't ignore... someone worthy.

She didn't know how to go about the whole 'becoming worthy' thing, so she did the best she could at what she was really good at. Abandoning lipstick and dresses completely, she practically became 'nerdiness' personified. She couldn't count how many times she declined an invitation to a party just so she could put in some extra time for studying. While her friends were out on dates, she was at home reading her textbooks. Adopting an almost dangerous single-mindedness and focusing completely on her studies; her grades skyrocketed and, after being caught in a corner crying (for Sasuke and how he's gone and far away and still *still* beyond her reach, even after everything) right after she aced an exam, she eventually gained the attention of Doctor Tsunade.

Under Doctor Tsunade's tutelage, Sakura finally discovered what she wanted to do besides being the wife of Sasuke...

She wanted to be a doctor.

She wanted to save lives. She wanted to *matter*. She wanted to be like Doctor Tsunade who saved people on a daily basis...

And Tokyo University was her first big step on achieving that goal.

But Sakura died, she died without even stepping foot inside the gates of Tokyo University.

Her death had been something mundane. A car accident—it was just a fluke, just another statistic. It would've been nice if she had died by pushing a child out of



harm's way and getting hit by the car instead. But no, her death had been borne out of her own stupidity. It happened because she forgot to look both ways before crossing the street.

Death was something she didn't want. Some people wished for death, so why couldn't they have gone in her stead? She was fully willing to take on the challenge of life, so why was she the one booted from the game?

Somehow, she felt cheated.

Those eighteen years between March 28, 1992 and July 23, 2010...

...In the end, what were they all for?

The afterlife, Sakura eventually found out, was surprisingly pleasant.

It was just like *life*, but unbound by anything physical. In fact, it was almost like living in a limitless dream. So even if she did have an issue about dying young, her idyllic life (or afterlife) in the cemetery was a good enough distraction. After all, it was hard to sulk when one spent her days having ectoplasmic tea parties with kind old ladies.

Indeed, the afterlife was good.

There was, however, a catch.

The afterlife has its levels. Souls can 'transcend', so to speak, from one level to the next one or even skip through some levels, depending on the circumstances.

The highest level involves a state wherein the soul is 'one' with 'everything'. This, of course, is everyone's goal, whether they know it or not. It takes a ridiculous amount of effort to just reach this plane, so very few have managed to do so. Also, the idea of being 'one with everything' seems unbearably boring, so most souls don't even bother to try. What they don't know is that being 'one with everything' has its own perks, one of them being the ability to manipulate nature and mete out some 'judgment' on some unsuspecting mortals in the form of "Surprise!Volcanoes" and "Instant!Typhoons". However, to reach the highest plane, one has to be mature enough to *not* abuse such powers, so it's all nil, really.

The next level involves living a life, or rather, an afterlife of servitude to a mortal or to a fellow spirit. One can say that this simply means being an 'angel'—but for the sake of being politically (or religiously) correct, this title is still unofficial. Of course, one can also go the exact opposite way and live an afterlife devoted entirely to mischief or evil and be a 'devil'. The latter, however, is mostly discouraged. The downside of this level is that the soul will be bound to his 'charge' for an indefinite amount of time, depending on how satisfactory the soul's performance is.



The third level involves simply ‘living’ the afterlife—which is basically just ‘life’ that is uncomplicated by mundane matters like food and sleep and... well... *shit*. This level speaks of an attachment to life that is still far too strong to allow any ‘transcendence’. While this may seem entirely fun, what with the impossibility of feeling any physical pain or falling into poverty and the comfortable sense of *normalcy* in it all, there are still some consequences. For one, the soul can’t go too far from the object that binds him or her to mortal life, i.e. the corpse/ashes.

The last level involves spirits with “unfinished business”. They are the most unfortunate. Trapped in a sort of limbo, these souls wander the earth, denying their own deaths and at the same time making a mockery of their lives. These are the souls who lived in hell—a hell that they have created for themselves.

Sakura learned all of this from Chiyo, a kind old lady who lived in a neighboring grave. Chiyo died more than a century earlier, but she had yet to transcend to the second stage, mainly because there was something she was trying to avoid—finding out about the fate of an errant grandson whom she loved and took care of but was unable to help.

Like Chiyo, Sakura was in the third stage. Though, she supposed it was understandable because she was still just a newly-dead. She wanted to transcend into the next stage because then, she might finally be able to *really* help Sasuke. Besides, wouldn’t it just be romantic if she could be his *angel*, even if it was in the literal sense? Hell, she’d be damned if she had to help him find a wife though. Just the thought of doing so was enough to send her into a fit of raging jealousy. Ugh, and she knew for a fact that the bastard had some sick plans of marrying a broodmare and have ten or so kids. There was *absolutely no way* that she could sit through all of that *vigorous breeding*, much less smile benignly while doing so.

So, no, she would not be able to become an angel unless she managed to shake off her *romantic love* for him and really just *love* him... *unconditionally*—which was extremely hard.

Or she could just be a devil and hate him completely, but she had a feeling that this was even harder.

So for now, she had to be content with staying where she was—the third stage.

It wasn’t so bad, really. The third stage was quite fun, especially since she loved conversing with the other ghosts. Some of them came from very interesting time periods, so she was privy to some of the best history lessons. There really never was a boring moment.

Her friends visited her once in a while too, so she wasn’t too lonely. Naruto and Ino were particularly nice, visiting about once a week, often providing humorous, if one-sided, conversation. Her parents, or sometimes just her mom, also tended to visit about twice every month, always bringing a bouquet of flowers. Kakashi visited her every other day, but only because her grave was located conveniently close to that of someone



named Rin. Judging by the lack of spiritual presence on the grave, though, she assumed that this ‘Rin’ person already transcended to the next level. Briefly, she wondered if this ‘Rin’ person was the one hovering over Kakashi, watching over him.

There was, however, a more regular visitor than even Kakashi, though she could argue that his visits weren’t really *visits*, per se. Sai went to the cemetery every single day, but he would usually just stay on some random grave and sketch.

She didn’t understand what he was doing, really. She was curious, but she had no way of finding out. Sai sat outside the boundaries set by her attachment to her own corpse, so she could not get close enough to him to learn anything.

Sai wasn’t the only one who made daily visits, but Sakura did not know that, what with the cemetery gates being too distant from her grave.

Having been in the afterlife for more than seven months already, Sakura had successfully managed to find her rhythm. She was always a fast learner, so blending into the whole ‘ghost’ lifestyle was hardly difficult for her. Her afterlife actually fell into a stable routine: during mornings, she would practice her ectoplasm-manipulation skills so that she could finally make her own tea, among other things. During the afternoon, she would have tea parties/gossip sessions/history lessons with the granny ghosts, by sundown, she would watch as Sai took up a position in any of the distant graves and work somberly on his sketchpad. This was her routine, and it was broken only by the occasional visit from a friend.

Whenever she had a guest, whether it was Naruto, Ino, her mom, or Kakashi, she would usually sit beside that person and reminisce.

Her life—the longer she stayed in the afterlife, the more distant and dream-like it seemed.

Sometimes, she had a hard time believing that she actually was flesh and blood before. In fact, if her friends didn’t visit and if Sai did not come to sketch, she’d have been inclined to think that maybe her “life” really was just a dream, that it didn’t really happen.

But what worried her was that, because of his absence, she was starting to think that Sasuke Uchiha did not really exist.

Maybe, *maybe*, he was just a figment of her imagination. Surely, *surely*, nobody could be as *perfect* as she seemed to remember him.

The more time she spent away from him (and not him away from her—because that was a different matter, him leaving her, it was different), the less she found herself thinking of him.

One time, she jolted in surprise when, last November, Naruto mentioned his name.



“Do you... do you remember when we were kids, Sakura-chan? The bastard was so uptight and serious that we could hardly have a decent conversation with him.”

It took her a few seconds to realize that, by bastard, Naruto was referring to Sasuke—and those few seconds unnerved her.

Then, she remembered fondly a deep voice saying ‘Hn’ and ‘Ah’, and for the first time in quite a while, she felt her knees go weak.

“Well, he’s not like that anymore. Sasuke’s talkative now... a bit too talkative. And not in a nice way too. He’s usually just bragging about something or another or just delivering an insult or something... it’s... he’s different now, Sakura-chan... even Suigetsu, Karin, and Juugo think so. You remember them, right? Those kids Sasuke hung out with after he abandoned us? Well, he abandoned them too... Sasuke—he’s really different now.”

And when she heard that, she felt a deep pain, one such that she never knew could be experienced in the afterlife. She felt like she was being split open, like she was leaving her own skin. It was agonizing, a stark contrast to the serene calm of her everyday routine. It made her feel restless, it made her want to leave the cemetery and go look for Sasuke, to wake him up and tell him that he shouldn’t have to do things like that, and to hug him, and to tell him that he didn’t have to be alone—

But then, she realized that he might not even remember her and, judging by his absence, he might not even care for her at all and this made her bitter and angry (never mind that she—of all people—conveniently forgot that there was an actual difference between ‘him-leaving-her’ and ‘her-leaving-him’. Blind to the double-standards that she imposed upon herself and on Sasuke, the truth, and transcendence, slipped further away from Sakura).

Come February, Naruto was saying different things.

“Cigarettes, Sakura-chan! Can you imagine that? Sasuke smokes! Just last year it was drugs and alcohol, now he has to add cigarettes to his ‘bad boy’ resume too! There are even some rather nasty rumors about him joining that notorious Akatsuki gang! And you know what those guys do, Sakura-chan... they’re... worse than the Yakuza.”

She could hear the sadness and the concern for their friend in Naruto’s tone, and she had felt slightly guilty at the realization that it had been quite a while since she felt the same emotions for Sasuke.

Contentment was abundant in the afterlife, so much so that it easily muffled any thoughts about a troubled boy from a previous life. When her own world was so neat and orderly and *routine*, it was difficult to think about someone who had made a complete mess of his, especially when *that someone* was nowhere to be seen (but really just beyond the gates, if only she cared to look).



Sakura was simply so content, so comfortable, that she hardly thought of becoming a doctor, or becoming ‘worthy’, or even of transcending and becoming an angel.

But if she had known how much the troubled boy really needed those thoughts (though he would never really admit it to anyone), stranded as he was in the gateway between life and death, forever clutching at iron bars that would never give, maybe she would have clung tighter to her goals and tried harder, rejected her stagnancy and *moved*.

Sakura’s birthday was a very enjoyable affair. She wondered once whether she should consider her death day as her birthday, considering that she *was* in the afterlife, after all. However, the other ghosts discouraged her, saying that birthdays were still different.

Her day started out perfectly nice, with several guests coming and leaving flowers. Her parents were the first to come, and then Naruto, then Ino, and then a group of her classmates came, then Kakashi (who brought flowers for her too, this time), and then finally, Doctor Tsunade and her assistant, Shizune.

The afternoon tea party with the granny ghosts was something special too, since they not only made ectoplasmic tea, but they also made ectoplasmic cookies (which are harder and more complicated to create).

Then, by sundown, she settled on her grave to watch as Sai would pick a random grave and start sketching again—only, this time, he didn’t do such a thing. Instead of picking a spot and sitting down, he went straight to Sakura’s grave and just stood there, fixing his gaze on the headstone.

Sakura was speechless. This new development was discomfiting, to say the least.

“Hag.”

And oh God, he was speaking out loud.

“I don’t know if ghosts are real or if you’re even there. But—”

He sighed—he *sighed*—*Sai sighed!* This really was becoming too surprising for Sakura, who never heard the boy standing in front of her say something that wasn’t an insult, much less *sigh* as if speaking was actually difficult for him. Really, was this the same Sai who called her ugly and had an odd fixation on... man-parts?

“—I’m not good at this. So I’ll just show you.”

Sakura leaned forward eagerly, her curiosity brimming.

Sai, however, merely took his sketchbook and opened it to the first page, causing Sakura to gasp in surprise as she realized what it was.

Slightly faded but obviously done with great skill was a sketch of her 14-year old self, smiling.



Then, before Sakura could examine it further, Sai turned to page two, which had a sketch of Sakura sitting at the docks, looking contemplatively at the lake.

Page three was a rough sketch of her with an angry expression, body poised to strike a punch.

Page four was another sketch of her, and so was page five, and page six, page seven, and page eight.

By page twenty-two, Sakura already knew what to expect.

The next five sketches were all of her on the hospital bed, all drawn with an uncharacteristically heavy hand, defined by hard, unforgiving strokes, all far less fine and far less perfect than the previous drawings.

The last page, however, was empty, but not clean. There were traces of pencil markings that were erased and redone and erased once again. Lines, circles, squares, all of them just traces, all smudged out, *erased*. The paper was even torn in some places, thinned out and eroded by constant rubbing.

By the time Sai closed the sketchbook, Sakura was unabashedly gaping. This was *not* what she expected at all. Hadn't he always called her 'ugly' and 'hag'? Why, why—

“So yeah, I guess what I'm saying is that I like you... I—I didn't understand it at first and I don't even know if I understand it now or if I ever will, but—”

Sai looked as expressionless as ever, but the smile on his face seemed hard at the edges somehow, like he was fighting hard to maintain it.

“—I haven't been able to draw *anything* at all for the past months.”

That time, Sai really did frown, and this unsettled Sakura more than any of his insults ever had.

“You know how important art is to me. The moment I could no longer see you, I just—I just stopped drawing. I tried to, but I couldn't. So if your death affected me and my art this much, then I probably really do love you...”

Sakura inhaled sharply at that, unable to believe her ears.

“...But the thing is, this can't continue. So—”

Sai bent down and placed the sketchbook beside Sakura's gravestone, his hand pausing once, as if hesitant, before he finally let go.

“—I'm leaving this here. As difficult as it is for me to part with this sketchbook, I realize that it's something I need to do. Think of it as a birthday gift; my offering to you. I can't stay stagnant, and I need to learn how to draw once more. It will be hard, but I will move on. I need to move on.”



Again, Sai let out a shuddering sigh, and Sakura was struck by how unused she was to the melancholic sound.

“I won’t come back after today. Honestly, I don’t even know if I can achieve that, if I can leave you alone, but I’ll certainly try my hardest.”

Then, with visible effort, Sai smiled.

“So I suppose this is the last time,” he said, extending a pale hand and brushing it against the cool grey stone, “Goodbye ugl—No. Goodbye, *Sakura*.”

Sai turned around then and Sakura could only watch his retreating back.

She wouldn’t deny it... it felt *nice* to be loved, even if she couldn’t return it. Somehow, she was able to view her life in a different light, like it was less of a failure than she initially thought.

Before she could contemplate more about the developments, however, a voice broke into her reverie.

“Tch, don’t tell me you were wooed by that, Sakura.”

It’s been ages since she heard that voice, but since it was the very last sound she heard as a living being, she knew that she would never forget it or mistake it for anything else.

Abruptly turning around, she gasped out, her heart doing a complete somersault as she realized that *he* was looking directly at *her*.

Did this mean that he, too, was—

“Sasuke-kun!”

He looked different somehow. He was still wearing his signature black shirt, complete with the Uchiha fan, but he was gaunter and leaner. Dark circles accentuated his eyes and his hair seemed more disheveled. But even more than that, there was something different in the way Sasuke *felt*. He seemed to be weary of the world, like he carried a huge weight on his shoulders. Even if he was wearing the same arrogant expression that he always had back when they were young, there was something that changed, something that made it seem bitter.

“You did promise that you would love me with all your heart, Sakura.”

“I—”

“Don’t you think it’s a bit wrong for you to be blushing like that?”

Sakura’s hand snapped up to her cheeks then, an automatic gesture meant to feel the heat that would no longer be there, not when she was a ghost.

“Tch, who am I kidding?” His face crumpled in the closest imitation of regret that she has ever seen him display. “I *killed* you, Sakura. How can you still love me after that?”



“Sasuke-kun, you didn’t kill me. I—”

“Sakura, Sakura, Sakura... even as a drug-induced hallucination, you’re still trying to convince me that there’s some good in me. It’s touching, really. But it’s stupid.”

Sasuke chuckled darkly, a sound that lacked mirth more than anything else.

“You’re so annoying, so naïve. But then, I always liked that about you. You almost made me believe that there was actually some good left in me too—*almost*.”

Sakura was too shocked to say anything else. She didn’t know what to react to: Sasuke saying that he actually ‘liked’ something about her or his thinking that she was a drug-induced hallucination.

“I wasn’t kidding when I told you that I hate you. I really do. You, with your ‘unwavering’ devotion, made me weak. Always, *always*, pulling me back, keeping me grounded, keeping me from my own goals—you were the most annoying distraction ever.”

“Sasuke-kun...”

“And then, *and then*, you just had to be stupid enough to get yourself hit by a car. Did you ever stop to think about how *I* would feel if the last person in the world who really ‘loved’ me fell into a coma? Did you?”

His voice was rising to a crescendo, and Sakura found herself flinching, never really comfortable with facing the brunt of his temper.

“Well if you did, then you would’ve been able to do something as simple as looking both ways before you crossed the street, hm?”

Again, he chuckled, and the emptiness of it made Sakura shudder.

“Was it really too much to ask for you to stay alive? ‘With all your heart’, you said, but then you couldn’t even keep yourself alive. You even had the gall to die on *my* birthday. Isn’t that funny, Sakura?”

She knew that there was something incredibly contradictory with Sasuke’s words. One minute he was blaming himself for ‘killing’ her and the next he’s talking as if it’s her own fault that she died. It was absurd, really, and quite undeserved on her part. She was already beginning to feel some resentment creep into her heart. How *dare* he, really? It wasn’t like she *wanted* to die.

“Did you think it was funny? Did you think it was funny to leave me like *they* did?”

Sakura never believed anyone whenever they made a comment on how precariously close to insanity Sasuke was, but now she was inclined to second-guess herself. His thoughts were just so disjointed—

“Was it revenge?”



“No—No, Sasuke-kun, I would never—”

“Did you do it because you hate me too?”

“No, Sasuke-kun, no, I—I love you, I still love you, so much—”

Sasuke closed his eyes, his features softening, smoothing out into a mask of contentment.

“That sounds so nice, Sakura, just as sweet as the first one. I wouldn’t mind listening to that forever. Do you know how many times I replayed your confession in my head whenever I felt like I couldn’t go on? It made me feel like I would always have something to go back to.”

When he opened his eyes, however, she saw that they were flinty, cold, and hateful.

“So how do you think I took it when I heard about what happened to you?”

“That’s not fair at all, Sasuke-kun, you never gave me any indication that you really cared about me so I—”

“Would it have made any difference if I did?”

“I—”

“Are you really stupid enough to think that you didn’t matter to me? Think, Sakura, *think*. I have nobody, *nobody at all*. I’m sad, I’m angry, I’m alone—Then suddenly, *you* appear. You shower me with attention, you think about me and care about me and you top it all off with a love declaration. You gave me what I wanted, but not what I needed. You made me happy, but ‘happy’ was not what I should be if I was ever to fulfill my goal. I was never supposed to be content until I had my revenge. You, by your ‘love’, made my life a mocking combination of heaven and hell.”

Sasuke’s tone was scathing, and Sakura could only recoil, unsure of what to feel about this new piece of information.

“So did you really think it was easy for me to leave you, the only semblance of normalcy in my life, for a future that was sure to be bleak and a road that led only to destruction? Do the math, Sakura. How much is a penny worth to a beggar? How much is it worth to a millionaire? Did you, with your family and friends and your bright future, ever stop to think that my departure hurt me more than it hurt you?”

Sakura reeled, feeling guilty for the fact that the possibility never crossed her mind.

“And you had to make things worse by continuing to chase me. Sure, it made me happy that you still loved me, but at the same time, it *frustrated* me, because I couldn’t, I *shouldn’t*—I was conflicted, Sakura. It was torture. You made me go through the whole painful process of rejecting happiness over and over again.”

“You should’ve told me this befo—”



“—and what? Make things harder for myself? Don’t be stupid.”

‘And what about me?’ the still-selfish part of her wanted to ask. ‘All the while, I thought you hated me. I was hurt too...’

“But Sasuke-kun, if it hurt you so much, then why did you leave in the first place? Couldn’t you just have stayed and accepted what we could have had? We could have been happy.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“But—”

“Look, it doesn’t matter anymore,” he cut her off. “I’m getting tired of this conversation anyway. So, you, dear figment of my imagination, should just disappear and leave me be. I’ve already reached new lows just by playing out that little fantasy where you say that you still love me in my head. Heh. Pathetic, really. I’m so *damn* pathetic.”

“Sasuke-kun...”

“Disappear already, damn it! I knew I shouldn’t have trusted Kabuto on those pills...”

Then, it all clicked together—

Of course, his sudden openness that verged on word-vomit, his uncharacteristic willingness to divulge his feelings and thoughts, his ability to see her, to talk to her, his thinking that she was just a figment of his imagination, a drug-induced hallucination—all of these could only mean one thing: Sasuke really was dead, but he didn’t know it.

A restless spirit—Sasuke became a restless spirit.

He was living in his own *hell*.

The thought in itself filled Sakura with so much agony that she felt like she would burst with it. If only she had done more, if only she wasn’t so selfish, if only she had tried harder, if only she *knew*, if only, if only, if only—

It was tragic and unfair and unbelievably wrong, that Sasuke who suffered so much in life would continue to suffer in the afterlife.

All those months that she had whittled away in a contented haze suddenly seemed trivial to her in the face of this bitter truth: that this, this broken, messed-up soul in front of her... This was her *Sasuke-kun*, and he was suffering so...

If she could do anything, anything at all... to make things different, she would.

She just... she just wanted him to be happy.

She wanted to cry out to someone, anyone, *‘help him, help him please. Save him. Help him.’*



But the world fell quiet, and she was left there, staring at Sasuke as he walked away, so alone and so despondent and so *wrong*.

Then, realization struck her—

She could try.

She wasn't sure if she was strong enough—the task just seemed so *monumental*—but she at least had to try.

She was ready. It was time.

Here, idyllic afterlife—it meant nothing to her.

She would leave it, leave it and not look back, no matter how difficult the road ahead would be.

She would transcend, comfort be damned.

It would hurt...

But she would do it...

For him.

"For Sasuke-kun..."

And then she grew wings.

La Carestia

And when he opened the third seal, I heard the beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

Book of the Revelations

Chapter Six

I.

July 23, 2011 Anno Domini

15,000 AND RISING: WHITE DEATH PLAGUE





HAKU MOMOCHI, at the young age of 13, had succumbed to the deadly grip of strain SS-6975 known as the White Death that had also claimed thousands of lives in a span of half a year. The incidence of this disease, which could be passed through droplets and inoculation, had risen to pandemic proportions, affecting 30 countries in a span of two months.

The spread of White Death occurred in Saint Wendel Hospital, Alchsbach, Germany. The hospital confined two civilians, Maito Gai and Yakushi Kabuto, both



Japanese immigrants, who suddenly complained of migraines after a horse-back riding session. After a brief consultation and series of laboratory tests, compulsory implementation of quarantine followed when massive bleeding in different mucosal orifices suddenly occurred. After a few days, their internal organs were found...

PLANE CRASH KILLS SARUTOBI, CREW IN APPENNINES

DOCTOR SARUTOBI ASUMA BME, MD. died yesterday in a plane crash near the edges of Genoa Gulf, located at the Pyrénées-Orientales, France. When investigators examined the site, the plane's aircraft's black box was said to be missing; and foul play was suspected. The Police said they had already apprehended three suspects, but refused to disclose further information.

The 78 year old CEO and founder of the Sarutobi Pharmaceuticals was the lead researcher and developer for the vaccines of SS-6975 strain, The White Death...

He sat idly on the cold basalt, back leaning against the even bricks as mismatched eyes looked upon the highly revered *Caput Mundi*, where even now, at the very precipice of cultured humanity, it still loomed over the sleeping world, unknowingly dark and powerful.

It was still as resplendent as ever, ageless and incomparable, this eternal city, staring at the blanket of smog that covered the metropolis. The dark cloud hovering over it was so thick that the tips of the sixty four colonnades were barely visible and the central obelisk was the one that pierced it. It made the city seem more ominous than usual, more deadly, more depraved, as if it was made of shadows and shades and nothing else.

He shifted, the granite biting the skin of his nape. And the awareness of how rare this would be, to soak in the image of skylights and dark waters, glinting innocently, filled him with a sense of elation. His contributions would be finished soon. The fruits of his efforts would—

“An angel once appeared on the castle roofs,” the trespasser started, with a tinkling laugh. “He flashed a sword of fire to announce the end of a plague. Ironical, to meet you here, isn’t it, *Kakashi*?”

At the sound of his name, he sat up and looked at the intruder. Nobody spoke his name with that much familiarity, except for—of course, Mikoto, who was now sitting over the ledge in a white knee-length dress as she swayed her bare feet, gazing at him with those wide gray eyes, like the personification of innocence, of purity.

Hypocrite.

She was a sham, a sham he used to love.



He no longer felt anything for this viper but disdain, a burning hatred, well-hidden, yes, but still as strong as ever. And it would never be quenched. Never, not after what she did. There would never be any forgiveness for *Pandora*, the first woman in their order, who was ecstatically curious to open the box of ills, releasing every kind of horror in this world. Sarutobi and Jiraiya—his colleagues, friends, almost fatherly figures—were the ones who tried to stop it, but it was futile as it was orders from the immortal above.

Mikoto might be playing the minority in this so called divine-plan, but she was unrepentant for starting the end of time.

Still, he could not deny that she looked as beautiful as ever. Not even pregnancy had marred her looks.

“That’s only a myth.”

“You don’t need to be wary of me. I came in peace,” her whisper was breathy, patient and empathic. “He was your mentor. Surely you feel a twinge of guilt.”

It seemed as if she could read his thoughts as she gave him a knowing smile, before gesturing to the little bundle she held in her arms.

She held a frail looking infant with a patch of black hair. As the tiny fist was being suckled, twin eyes of jet black stared naively at him. The mere macabre image of a dead innocent was all he could think of to keep himself from slaughtering the child then and there, ending the sorry chain of events.

Trying to smother the impulse, he stood up and did not even bother to confirm her satisfied expression. Instead, he gazed at the angelic structures that carried nails, thorn crowns and whips, alight in unearthly iridescence.

“Of course I do,” he said after a long pause. “In fact, I’m going to his grave this afternoon. Doctor Namikaze and his wife will be there at 1 pm. Do you want to come?”

“Ah, the childless couple?”

There was a pleased lilt when she mentioned them, as if there was a clandestine arrangement made especially for them. “A pity that they’ll have to wait for five more years before their wish comes true, in the expense of their lives and—dear me, are you trying to change th—no, I won’t call it changing the topic.” A pale finger waggled, as if admonishing a wayward brat, almost luminescent in the darkest of evenings. “You’re just oversimplifying it. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to. Your emotions run deeper than that.”

She was smiling at him playfully, deceptively pure, and yet, with that simple sentence, she sent him a very important message: *you cannot lie to me*. As it was, he couldn’t help but return her smile with his own sly grin.

“*Fiat iustitia et pereat mundus.*”



His own voice sounded remote to him. Speaking in Latin always made him too aware of his status, his profession, his mask, his own part in this grim charade that would ultimately lead to the world's—

“There you go again, hiding behind your scholarly Latin phrases.” She laughed, her voice tinkling like chimes on a windy night. “Explain it to me. I’m not quite as well-versed in Latin as the most erudite, Kakashi.”

“I’m just saying that I did what had to be done,” he said as he turned away from her, and he wondered whether it was possible to believe one’s own lie. It would certainly be easier.

(Let there be justice, though the world perish.)

“How awfully appropriate,” Mikoto remarked contemplatively.

Kakashi said nothing, the conversation ending as his companion turned her attention to the infant who was just beginning to stir. Silence engulfed them for a while, broken only by the infant’s weak crying.

“He takes after Fugaku.” He tried to keep the bitterness out of his remark.

“No,” she said, her long spindly fingers tickling the infant’s stomach—she reminded him of the witches in fairytales, those demon females that devoured children. He watched her in the corner of his eye, and he could barely suppress his shudder at the words which she uttered in the lowest of whispers. They were almost inaudible, but they were deafening in their truth,

“He’s mine.”

The sound of a shattering wail filled the air then, disrupting the unusual stillness.

The boy was hungry, dark head tossing and turning on his mother’s bosom in disdain.

Kakashi noticed, but he knew it would be futile to remind Mikoto.

She would not feed the child. Not yet.

II.

August 11, 2019 Anno Domini

WAR, JAPAN FINALLY CONQUERS WESTERN UNION

OSLO, NORWAY—was the last Scandinavian city to fall as General Sai of the Imperial Japanese Army invaded Europe. Troops marched on the ruins of the dilapidated Oslostrikken with many of the wounded rounded up by Japanese soldiers.



Many countries, after witnessing the destruction caused by the Japanese Vermillion, an encapsulated nuclear head...

The eight-year old Uchiha Sasuke stood over an open grave, mentally calculating its dimensions, *six feet in length, six feet in height, six—*

“You shouldn’t stand too close to the edge, you know.”

If he heard the words, he gave no indication.

“Father Kakashi said that—”

“I don’t care about what Kakashi said,” he cut her off rudely, with the faintest trace of loathing. He wished she would just leave him be. Kakashi had introduced them both earlier that day, and if his initial judgment of her personality was right, then the chances of her just leaving him alone were close to nil.

As it was, she only moved closer to him and stood by his side.

Without looking at him, she spoke, “Yeah, well, neither do I.”

As if proving her claim, she moved closer to the edge, sat down, and let her feet dangle. “Father Kakashi saw me doing this earlier, and he got really mad,” she said offhandedly, trying to sound nonchalantly.

For a moment, it seemed like he would lapse into another silence.

“They’re going to bury my mother here this afternoon.” He pointed to another open grave a few feet away, “My father, there.”

For no reason that her childish logic could possibly comprehend, fear gripped her.

She stood up abruptly and backed several steps away from the grave.

“You...” Sasuke craned his neck to look at her then, and in a disdainful tone, “are annoying”.

It had occurred to her, belatedly, that what she did might have been a little bit rude. But before she could explain or even utter a quick apology, he had already walked away. And all she could do was watch his back.

Haruno Sakura was not one for watching arguments.

In fact, she would much rather be miles away from one. She wanted peace, peace and harmony and—okay, so she just did not want to be punished.

Kakashi sat on the tall cushioned chair behind his desk, while Sasuke was on the stiff wooden chair designated for guests, or more commonly, for errant students. Sakura was off to a corner watching them, hoping that neither would take notice of her.



“No.”

She groaned at the mulish refusal, and wished, not for the first time that day, that the boy would just give in and, more importantly, not relay the incident that happened earlier. Father Kakashi would be mad if he found out that she had gone back to the empty graves.

“Sasuke, I fail to see how you have any say in the matter.”

“I am not staying in the same roof as her.” Sakura visibly flinched at the finger that was hatefully pointed at her.

Kakashi raised a fine eyebrow, but did not spare Sakura a glance. Instead, the priest and headmaster of the Catholic school just stared straight into the boy’s eyes, intimidating and daunting. Silently, Sakura marveled at how Sasuke didn’t even flinch. She had seen other boys in his position, and all of them would’ve succumbed to Kakashi by now. Sasuke only met Kakashi’s stare with his own glare, and Sakura thought that he was either very brave or very stupid.

“And why not?” Kakashi said as he leaned back into his chair. His voice sounded cool, almost amused, but Sakura knew him well enough to know that he was quickly losing patience.

“Because—”

She squirmed in her ruffled black dress, the one she had worn to the funeral, as Sasuke turned to look at her. She sent Sasuke a pleading look, but he only gave her a scathing glare in return.

“Because?” Kakashi probed, effectively regaining Sasuke’s attention.

“Because she’s annoying! Besides, I have my own house, my parents’ house. I belong there, not here! I have to oversee the whole estate—”

She sighed in relief. For a while there, she thought he would say “she desecrated my parents’ grave” or something equally damning. However, her relief was short-lived when she heard Kakashi speak.

“Your parents entrusted you to me. I have complete control of your estates until you turn 18. You can resume living there when you’re old enough. For now, you have to accept your fate. Resist and I will see you punished severely.”

The words were said nonchalantly but with a steely edge, and nobody in the room doubted the truth of his statement, not even for one moment.

“For your bull-headedness and also for you to have an inkling of what awaits you if you continue to be stubborn, you won’t have dinner tonight, nor breakfast tomorrow. I will allow you to eat only if you promise me your full obedience. This isn’t your territory, Uchiha Sasuke, and you are not master of this household. I am your superior here and *I do not* tolerate insubordination.”



Sakura's eyes widened, thoroughly surprised. She had never known Kakashi to mete out such a severe punishment, especially for a child who just lost his parents. She knew him as a rather lenient guardian, a kind priest who didn't place much stock on harsh discipline. In fact, he was one of the laxest people she had known. And this harshness was so uncharacteristic of Kakashi that she did not know what to think of it. Sasuke's offense was not really that serious. She had done far worse things, and the worst Kakashi had made her do was to clean the shelves on the library. And even then, he stopped her halfway so that they could enjoy the afternoon soap operas they watched together.

Wanting to stand up for Sasuke but too afraid of this change in her mentor, Sakura kept silent. She watched as Sasuke's face contorted into anger, completely devoid of fear.

"Both of you are dismissed."

She saw Sasuke gritted his teeth and clenched his fists before turning around and storming out of the room, head still held high. She knew it would take a long time before he would break and surrender his pride. And it was at that moment that she understood the true meaning of guilt.

She followed him soon after, hastily and clumsily walking towards the door. She even bumped the pillar holding the previous headmaster Sarutobi's bust along the way, and the lack of the usual admonition from Kakashi made her even more uncomfortable. Closing the door slowly as she went out, she only caught a glimpse of Kakashi rubbing his temples in a despondent way.

At the corner of her eyes, she saw Sasuke disappear around the bend of the corridor.

He would grow hungry tonight, she thought, and the wave of guilt that assaulted her was overwhelming in its intensity.

Sakura flinched as the wooden floors creaked under her weight. Never had the school's corridors seemed more ominous to her, the stone walls seemed to want to swallow her, and shadows seemed to keep darting around her. Still, she crept on determinedly, trying her best to steady the trembling of her hands, making the china she held rattle.

Finally, she reached her destination. She balanced the cup she brought in one hand and reached out for the door knob. However, just inches away, she heard movements inside the room. She bit her lip, hesitant. She thought he was asleep, that she could leave the food on his bedside and leave without him knowing.

She retracted her hand and wondered if she should just go. Maybe she wasn't welcome. Maybe he was angry. Maybe—

"You might as well come in."



The voice startled her, and she almost dropped the platter and the cup that she was holding. *Ah well, no use turning back now*, she thought. Steadying herself and taking a shaky breath, she reached for the door and opened it.

“How-How did you know?”

“I saw your shadow under the door. Also, you were being noisy.”

For a few seconds, she stood there and stared at him, trying to see if he was angry. Sakura noticed how he seemed preoccupied, somehow, and she realized why when she saw him crouch at the corner of the room.

“What have you got there?”

For a moment, he didn’t speak, then—

“My kitten... well, what used to be my kitten, anyway.”

Sakura placed the platter and cup on his desk and went to him. She peered behind his back and saw a black kitten lying on a bunch of rags. It looked to be sleeping, so Sakura reached out to stroke its fur.

“Don’t,” Sasuke said, his tone oddly gentle, though the hand clasping her wrist was not. “It’s dead.”

“Oh—why?”

For a while, Sasuke didn’t seem inclined to answer. And the silence, for Sakura, was oppressive.

“Don’t we all ask that?”

Sakura cleared her throat, not really knowing what to say. She looked at the kitten once more, and took in its emaciated appearance, how its belly seemed to curve in, how its ribs stuck out conspicuously. She slowly realized how the kitten died and felt a stab of guilt.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, her voice sounding weak and distant.

Sasuke just shrugged and wrapped the kitten’s corpse with a blanket carefully. He put it aside and turned around to face her.

“Well?”

Sakura cocked her head to the side and furrowed her brows, her mouth set in a confused pout.

“Why are you here?”

“O-Oh! That! I—uhm, look, I know you hate me. But I understand that it’s my fault you’re being punished and I know I’m horrible for not owning up to what I did and—well, let’s just say I’m feeling very guilty.” She glanced at him to gauge his



reaction, and seeing his indifferent pose, she hastily added, “So I brought you some food,” gesturing to the food on his desk.

When he remained silent, still looking at her, she felt compelled to expound further, “It’s been two days since that fight you had with Father Kakashi, and I still haven’t seen you eat, so I thought that maybe you were hungry, and—”

“I don’t want it.”

“I thought that maybe since—wha-what?”

“I said.” The bite made her flinch. “I don’t want it.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

She wondered if, perhaps, the hunger had addled his brain.

“Aren’t you...” Her words were careful, curious. “Hungry?”

Again, Sasuke shrugged.

“Isn’t everyone?”

She watched him then, her brows furrowed in confusion. Sakura didn’t understand why his answers always had to be so cryptic.

“What do you mean?”

“I meant exactly what I said. Everyone’s hungry.” His tone was bored, as if he had expected nothing more than ignorance from her.

“Well, I’m not,” she said haughtily, annoyed at his condescending attitude. “I just had dinner—”

“Yes, you are.”

Sakura frowned. Who was he to tell her if she was hungry or not? It was not like their bellies were somehow telepathically linked. And besides, he was wrong, she was most definitely not—

“Hungry for approval and acceptance.” Sasuke, heedless of the shock on her face, advanced a few steps towards her and plowed on ruthlessly, “You’re hungry for praise. You’re hungry for attention.

“You always play the part of little miss perfect to please other people, it’s all an act—oh, don’t worry, Sakura, you play your part well. Nobody has noticed.” His condescending expression contorted into one of hatred and his once coldly calm voice rose, turning into a tumultuous tenor, “You’re a fraud, a fake. You’re hungry. You’re famished. You’re just like the rest of humanity. You’re—”

Sakura recoiled, her hands poised above her, almost like a shield. Sasuke was so angry, the hatred in his voice was palpable, and she was the unwitting recipient. She



couldn't even understand half of what he was saying, and yet she was afraid. The words had struck something deep inside her, something she didn't acknowledge, didn't even know existed.

"Stop it..." Her small shoulders trembled; her plea was nearly accompanied with a dry sob. "Please."

Sasuke paused, the reality of the situation dawning upon him. Where did those sudden outbursts come from?

Gritting his teeth, he took a few calming breaths. Before he could apologize though, the girl had turned on her heels and ran out of the room. He looked at the door for a long time before his gaze wandered to the desk, where Sakura had left the food. It suddenly struck him that, contrary to what he had accused her of, she had risked the disapproval of Kakashi just to give him some aid. It was, perhaps, an act of compassion which he had unjustly punished her for. Again, his gaze wandered. It fell to the forlorn bundle on the corner of the room, his kitten.

Unbidden, memories of his family flitted through his mind. He remembered his father's pragmatic expression, his mother's kind smile, his brother's—why had his brother murdered them? He didn't understand; it was unfair. Everything was unfair.

Rage engulfed him at the memory of what his brother did, and his hands moved on their own accord, sweeping the platter and the cup off the desk in one swift motion. The objects fell to the floor with a noisy clatter that only accentuated the complete silence that came afterward.

A surge of grief assaulted him, his heart contracting painfully at the sensation. He closed his eyes tightly then, willing his tears not to fall, a difficult and ultimately futile effort for one so young.

III.

January 13, 2025 Anno Domini

FIFTEEN-YEAR RED WAR ENDS

AS THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA SURRENDERS TO JAPAN, after an estimated thirteen million civilians died during the two week siege of the Imperial Japanese Army, General Sai, General-Commander of the attack, proclaimed that the war was finally over.

"It is mortifying," the 31-year old commander said. "But for change to happen, there is a need for this necessary sacrifice."

However, fifteen civil war attempts had happened within the past few days after many nations objected the newly built empire...



“It’s difficult to explain Ino.”

“What? Too difficult for dear Sakura-chan, the girl genius?” said Ino, her voice carrying a cajoling lilt. Sakura merely rolled her eyes, ignoring the gloved hand that was being wagged in front of her face.

“Biology is simple. Chemistry is simple. Math is simple. Uchiha Sasuke is not simple. Everything about him just leaves me confused. One minute he’s nice, the next he’s a complete jerk—”

“Maybe he’s bipolar?” her friend quipped.

Sakura rolled her eyes, slightly annoyed at how her best friend could manage to make the most inane comments.

“No. Ino, he’s not a nutcase. He’s one of the smartest—”

“Exactly my point. Exceptionally smart people are hardly ever right in the head. Look at Van Gogh, at Nietzsche,” she said, waving her hands for emphasis. “Sad, though, that someone so prettily handsome can be so messed up in here,” Ino said, gesturing to her brain with a soiled glove.

“Will you stop interjecting? You asked me to explain this *thing* I have for Sasuke-kun, and here you are cutting into my every sentence. Besides, I’m not the one who’s into geniuses,” said Sakura, giving her friend a knowing look.

“Hey! That’s different! Shikamaru’s a genius, a *normal* one; but Sasuke, he... he’s—there’s just something wrong with him.”

“Ino!”

“Alright, alright, geez, forehead girl, no need to be so feisty,” said Ino, holding up her hands in mock surrender.

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds, both taking some time to gather their thoughts. But then, Ino spoke, her tone serious.

“Seriously though, Sakura... just be careful.”

Sakura glared at her friend for a few seconds before looking up at the sky, her expression turning into one of utter surrender and despair.

“I just...”

She sighed, a dreadful sound of pure melancholy.

“I... I just want him to be happy.”

Up above, a hawk was gliding in a wide arc; it was carrying a dead rabbit in its talons.



He watched her from the windows, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. She acted differently when she knew he was watching, and it both amused and irked him. It irked him because her IQ seemed to drop a few notches whenever she spoke to him. And yet, it amused him, because she was no longer hungry for everyone's approval, only for his.

And it was ironic, that somebody would hunger for famine.

"She's awfully good at growing plants, isn't she?"

Sasuke frowned, mindful now of the silent droning of an electronic wheelchair.

"What do you want, Naruto?" he snapped, turning his head to glare at the newcomer, a blond-haired boy of about six or seven years old. The boy looked more dead than alive with his blotched, sallow skin and gaunt cheeks. But despite his sickly appearance, the boy gave off an aura of strength. He carried himself as if he could take on anyone and anything in his path, without flinching, at that. For one thing, he was able to meet Sasuke's glare with a mocking smile. Not many people could do that without fearing retribution.

"Nothing, nothing at all," the boy said, his tone dripping with false innocence, his electric blue eyes twinkling with mischief. "I merely want to join you in admiring Sakura-chan's way with plants."

The wheelchair came to a stop directly beside Sasuke, who had not taken his eyes off Naruto.

"Those pumpkins—they seem rather healthy despite the heavy pollution, don't they?"

Against his wish, Sasuke averted his eyes and turned to look at what Naruto was talking about. He didn't notice before that she was growing pumpkins, and seeing it now made his mouth draw into a thin line.

"I really admire Sakura-chan. She's a practical girl, not frivolous at all. Look, she's not growing flowers like Ino-chan is."

Naruto's grin widened when he saw how Sasuke's hands were clenched into fists. The boy was a master at bare minimums, both in words and in movement. His self-control was almost legendary. And Naruto knew by the boy's simplest actions that he was on to something.

"Also, Sasuke, she told me what she wants to be... when she grows up.

"Would you like me to tell you?" Naruto asked in a sing-song voice when his companion still refused to reply, further igniting Sasuke's dread.

The boy continued to make remarks about Sakura's apparent talent at growing things and by the time he had finished speaking, a sick feeling had settled into Sasuke's stomach.



“Go away,” he hissed, nails digging into his palm. “Go away, Naruto.”

But Naruto didn’t move. He had a point to make.

“I am merely reminding you,” said the young child, suddenly sounding like an adult with the amusement completely gone from his voice, “that this...”

Sasuke sensed that the boy was looking at him, but he refused to meet the gaze, his glare directed at the pink-haired girl in the garden who was looking up at him, waving her gloved hand cheerfully, a bright smile on her cherubic face.

“...this cannot end happily.”

Sasuke swallowed, suddenly noticing how dry his mouth was.

“I know.”

IV.

May 13, 2028 Anno Domini

THREE LARGEST GRANNARIES BOMBED, WORLDWIDE HUNGER FEARED

AVIGNON, FRANCE—the third largest oat grain silo and factory was destroyed in a massive explosion dealt by C-4 explosive. It was suspected to be the work of vigilant military rebels supporting the amassing food riots happening across the country side, in particular the...

The man made no attempt to cover the sound of his heavy footfalls, letting them resonate through the solid stone walls of the once grand cathedral freely. Two old women sitting at the front row looked at him with thinly veiled disdain for his irreverence, but he didn’t care. There was nothing in the building that garnered respect from him anyway, only hatred. What else could anyone feel for an institution that killed truth and paved the way for death and destruction?

The church warped the truth, so much that it was no longer recognizable. People never did find out that good and evil were fruits of the same tree. And it was through good’s greed that balance was lost and the world fell into irreversible chaos.

But the truth would not be hidden. They were able to do so for many years, but not anymore. The church’s halls were finally as hollow as its traditions.

The time was ripe for change, for purging.

The truth was out. The wheels of history were turning.

They were starting to move.



Some were catching on. People had stopped going to church long ago; abandoning all the archaic rituals in favor of all that was worldly. Epicureans—that's what the people called themselves—a fancy term for degenerate and amoral. They were still ignorant of *everything*, but at least they were seeing through the sham of organized religion. Christians were a dying stock; even the lukewarm ones were disappearing. The only ones left were bitter old women who had nowhere else to go and wizened priests feeding off the scraps of the dying institution. And they were no better than the rest of the world.

Oddly, the thought brought him comfort. It made his job easier. It was, after all, easier to starve those who were used to being full.

Tearing his eyes off the wooden cross, he turned away from the altar and headed towards the confessional.

He glanced around to make sure nobody was looking and stepped inside.

The confessional smelt of dust and incense—a heady combination that made the man's head spin. Nonetheless, he swallowed his revulsion and knelt reverently.

"*Shalom aleichem*," he said, his voice barely louder than a whisper, "Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

"*Aleichem shalom*," was the steady reply. "Be at ease, Son, for the heavens have—"

Not letting the priest finish, he plowed on, "I have caused the death of millions, father."

His voice held no remorse, only amusement. The priest on the other side sensed this, and sighed in annoyance.

"It's rude to belittle the sufferings of others, Sasuke."

Sasuke only scoffed in response.

"Those were real lives. The least you can do is—"

"Stop acting like a saint, Kakashi. It doesn't suit you."

For a minute, Kakashi was unhinged. Nobody called his name with such familiarity except for Mikoto; and the reminder that Sasuke truly was his mother's son unnerved him, scared him. Not for the first time, he wished that Sasuke would attach an honorific to his name like everyone else.

Nonetheless, Kakashi took a deep breath and replied, his voice low and serious.

"Then stop acting like the devil. You know very well that this isn't about sides, not anymore."

The reprimand fell on deaf ears.



Disappointed at the change in his former student, Kakashi decided to let the matter drop and get back to business.

“So I take it that the mission was a success?”

“Yes. The details are in my report,” Sasuke replied, his manner becoming formal as he slipped a small brown folder through a narrow crack at the side of the partition. “Suffice it to say that the food riots will reach Paris in a matter of days.”

“And the preparations for the next bombing?”

“They’re in place. I—”

Sakura knelt on one of the pews and bowed her head in silent prayer. She didn’t look at the altar. The mere thought that she would no longer see the golden cross there saddened her.

It was stolen last week by some looters, and the church was unable to do anything about it. The police said they had too much on their hands to recover a lost artifact and although they would *try*, Father Kakashi and Sakura shouldn’t expect anything.

They knew it was hopeless. They wouldn’t get it back.

The decaying, termite-ridden wooden cross, a relic from the cathedral’s earlier days, was a poor substitute for the gold one. But then, she thought wryly, it was only fitting for the state that the church was currently in.

It was sad that the great Cathedral had fallen into ruin. Nobody really cared anymore. Just outside the building, she was propositioned by a male prostitute who was leaning disrespectfully on a sculpture of St. John the Baptist. The blatant show of immorality was shameful.

‘How rotten can society get before it caves in on itself?’ she wondered.

Stifling the sense of righteous indignation at the world’s festering sense of morality, she made the sign of the cross and rose to leave.

“Have you gotten a good look at her?”

He failed to prevent the blood from creeping up his face, embarrassed at the thought of being caught staring even through the wooden partition that separated him and his former mentor.

He supposed his sudden silence gave him away.

He hadn’t even realized that he had stopped speaking.



It wasn't his fault, however. The glimpse he had of the girl he coveted, hindered as it was by the confessional door's pattern of Celtic knots, had brought him crashing back, making him forget his grim mission for a moment and remember that he was an adolescent too and that he wasn't exempt from the changes wrought by his age. Nonetheless, there was nothing he could do about it. A normal life was out of the question, and he had come to terms with the fact long ago. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and fought to regain composure.

It was, however, a losing battle, as Kakashi's next words made him lose it completely, almost making him hurl the meager contents of his stomach in a violent surge of vomit.

"I hope you did, because she's your next target."

V.

June 29, 2028 Anno Domini

BUSHFIRE DESTROYS HALF OF CHINA'S CROPS.

LINYA, CHINA—Crops of yeast and rice stored for the next five years were burned from an extensive bushfire that started from some unknown farm. 16,000 hectares of rice fields, corn and other crops were destroyed from the extreme heat. Experts said that this was an effect of global warming, that the flammable exhumers in the polluted air were now being ignited by the extreme rise in temperature.

There was a surge of panic among the people as economic analysts said that the calamity added to the damage done by the sudden deluge of hurricanes in the Western Area, greatly worsening the shortage of staple foods. Disease contamination among stock animals, namely fowls, pigs and cows, also increased. Thus, lessening the production of dairy products...

"Sakura, you've been staring at that flask for five whole minutes. It's troublesome. Just say what's on your mind already and get to work."

The said girl glared at her coworker but was secretly thankful for what she knew was genuine concern.

Sighing, Sakura removed her goggles and walked to her friend's desk. She had developed a strong bond with the genius and had grown to respect the dedication which he poured into his work, despite his proposed laziness. The fact that he was her best friend's boyfriend helped too since they had a common ground—they were never tired of complaining about Ino's crazy antics. The blonde was simply indomitable, a ray of sunshine in this otherwise bleak era, and they both loved her for that.



“Shikamaru, it’s just that I... I’m worried that we won’t be able to develop the crop in time. People are dying and here I am thinking about...”

“Is this about Sasuke again? Because you know very well what my stand is on *him*.”

“Well, yes, in fact, it *is* about him. I’m just wondering where he went, that’s all. I mean, I never understood why he left. I keep on thinking that it’s my fault—”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

Sakura flinched at his words; they seemed like an insult, but she knew it was actually just Shikamaru’s characteristic bluntness.

“What do you mean?”

“Sasuke had bigger things in his mind, much bigger than some sappy adolescent love story. I know this because I talked to him. If your ‘love’ for him encompassed your whole world back then, it was different for him. Probably, your love was just a speck, a bothersome bump—”

“Are you saying that he didn’t care about me?”

“No, just that your attention was appreciated, but unwelcomed and ultimately unimportant in the face of the bigger issues. Had he been anyone else, you two would’ve eloped by now. But he’s not, so you should just forget about it, find someone easier to love.”

“But I can’t—”

“You can’t, or you won’t?”

“If I forget about him,” she said deliberately, her voice going stronger by each word, “this project of ours will never be finished.”

Shikamaru raised a thin eyebrow and looked at her in a calculating manner. Sakura looked back, unflinching under his scrutiny.

“I’m doing this for him, everything—it’s always been for him.”

Neither of them spoke for a long while, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

“Sakura, take this advice from a friend. Forget about him.”

“But I already told you, the project—he, Sasuke’s my motivation, always has been! “

“Then damn the project. Forget about him, for both your own sake and his.”

“What? But I don’t—I don’t understand. This is our project, Shikamaru. You know how important it is. How can you just tell me to abandon it?”

“Forget I said anything.”



“Shikamaru? Please, if you know something about Sasuke, tell me.”

However, Shikamaru would say no more no matter how hard she pressed.

VI.

June 12, 2030 Anno Domini

MIRACULOUS DISCOVERY, SOLUTION TO THE FAMINE

YATOMI SPECIAL AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE—An intern, Sakura Haruno, at the young age of 20, amazed the International Rice Research Institute professionals as she presented her solution to the worldwide hunger. A miracle crop, a newly developed grain specie called IR-777 Manna, was earning positive reviews...

Tailing her for almost half a day wasn't easy, but it could be done. Sakura might have the most conspicuous features, but she was rather skilled in blending in with the bustling crowds of the old city. It spoke volumes, that maybe she wasn't as innocent as he thought she was.

As he saw her walk past the old pathways inside the aged synagogues and ancient cemeteries, curiosity gnawed on him. Was she any different now? Granted that there was something new in her stance; more confident and straight. Her hair never grew past her shoulders, but it was rather dry for someone who used to wash it carefully with conditioner back in the old days. She wore absolutely no make-up, except for a colorless gloss for the cracking of her lips. Her hands were still as slender, her form was a bit taller, lithier.

Radiant.

Sakura still smiled at the odd little moments, as if there was something funny while she was in deep thought.

It made him sick that it was still Sakura.

“Yes, yes, M'am.” He could hear her words drift, tinged with exasperation as she tried to defeat the dissonant noise of the rushing crowd. “I'm already... I won't be lost, I've been here before, and no.” She gave a frustrated sigh. “I know, I know. Will be careful. I hope you're not in the wine cellar, I can hear echoes. Bye!” There was a short laugh before she slid her phone shut.

His operator—the one who was on the other end of the blue tooth transmitter—was probably puffing an expensive carcinogenic stick. Sasuke could hear the tense, less languid inhale. “Make it an accident.”



He heard the clear instructions as he let the engine roar angrily.

Ukončete, prosím, výstup a nástup—

The dark car swerved to meet the tram in a head collision.

Before jumping off the vehicle, he saw brilliant green before a flash of white blinded everything.

VII.

August 28, 2030 Anno Domini

SEVEN DEATHS IN A CAR ACCIDENT

INSIDE THE PRAGUE METRO SUBWAY, seven civilians died in a car crash because a probable drunk driver entered the open subway station at nine in the evening, destroying several infrastructures and wounding 18 bystanders. Meanwhile, seven died upon arrival...

Law enforcements had surrounded and exhumed the remains of the wrecked Black Urroco, but they did not find any passenger. They assumed that the driver rolled out of the car during the impact and was among those who were crushed beneath the rocks. Dopravní podnik Praha (D.P. Praha) would take full responsibility of the expenses...

“Are you comfortable?” The concern was lukewarm at best, but Sakura appreciated it all the same when Sai had settled himself on the recliner, pleased.

Sakura fidgeted, crumpling the expensive crimson silk dress for this occasion with her blunt nails. She was surprised and secretly thrilled that the world had seen the potential of her research, as she now sat in front of a prominent leader who had deemed it necessary to have a little chat. Those elites invited to the Grand Dinner were impressed with her accomplishments and told her with too much enthusiasm that this was a great opportunity, though, their words felt empty to her ears.

A promising project to be funded by such a great man was indeed a big step for her career and for her goal to help those poor souls dying in starvation, but she was warned that she should tread carefully on the young man’s graces. There was a huge possibility that her work would be used to feed a powered army, but she had no qualms in using any resources to pave the way of a good life for everyone.

The suspicion further increased when her wise mentor warned her, ‘*Never trust men who always smile so carelessly.*’ There was something about the ever-grinning young man that made her hackles rise, even if she already knew him before.



Sai was a sporadic guest professor in her massive university, frequently seen in those small awnings to quietly sketch the large marble statues in the grassy quadrangles with a devout expression. Her childhood best friend, Ino, introduced him as her very young uncle on her maternal side; he and Ino were close like they were siblings—or in Ino’s words, gay best friends. It was only a matter of time before Sakura warmed up to him as if they were of the same age, although, she always had to endure Sai’s constant need to tease her *hideous forehead*.

After a series of brief encounters and pleasant discourses (he was quite a connoisseur in different aspects of art), he was gone and the next thing she knew, he was already rising up in the ranks of the Imperial Calvary.

“Sai...” It was now or never. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course,” he stated with ease. “After all, I’m trying to render the world a great service. Retributions for the casualties. And you’re the one who instigated this project. I’m very grateful for that.”

“Somebody...” Sakura inhaled as she thought of those eyes staring back at her, filled with intent—hatred or apathy, she never wanted to know. A gradual increasing pressure in her chest made the nervous *thump-thump* of her heart louder. “H-He tried to kill me on my way here.”

The general stiffened, taking a quick sweeping gaze over the bustle of chattering people and leaned to her with a low, dangerous whisper, “You saw him?”

She didn’t glance up, afraid that *his* face would be seen in her eyes. “No, I just needed to tell you that—”

“You need more protection?” the young officer prompted, that calm façade marred with a neutral frown.

“No, it’s not that. I know it’ll be a great inconvenience, but ...if something happens to me.” She breathed through her mouth, an anxious quiver, wishing that everything would just explain why, *why now?* when everything would finally be finished.

She might have done this for *him*, for that face she saw that fateful afternoon, but her selfish choice must not affect the lives of many innocents.

“Please, if something happens to me, Shikamaru would definitely take over; along with the others, let them continue my work. Support them as well. And—”

“And?”

“And.” She was really unreasonable. “Don’t catch him—my killer, assassin. Just let him go.”

“Why that’s...” Sai paused, his smile more genuine than those fake grins that he usually gave, and he sighed in mock amusement. “That’s quite unorthodox, Ugly.”



Laughing at the old nickname had certainly loosened up the gravity of their conversation. “Well, promise me. Please. I just want that. Nothing else.”

“It will certainly be done, Hag.”

“Thank you.” She gave a relieved laugh. “Now, have you seen Naruto? That little kid looks so grown up now! I heard that he’s under Father Kakashi right now, so I’m a little worried about the discipline since he’s very hard on his boys—”

Sakura continued her nonsensical chatter, failing to notice the small strange details: why Sai wasn’t entirely concerned at the idea of her death, why he didn’t press any questions about the details of the recent attack. But she was too relieved because of his promise to even care about the man’s grim expression when Sakura lapsed into a relaxed silence.

The gentle old butler had almost forcibly blocked Sakura on her way out of the mansion. She was invited by their gracious master to stay for the night, besides, Lady Yamanaka would arrive so wouldn’t it be convenient to catch up for old times sake?

Refusing to decline such an offer, the young woman gracefully accepted the new set of clothes they provided in her large guest room, located about a yard away from the little den of book collections and expensive canvas replicas.

While waiting for Ino, she set on to enclose herself with the crinkly old pages and the crackling warm fire. Sakura was pretty sure that Ino would check on her uncle first, before they would tell her she was here.

However, she halted when she saw Sai sitting in front of his oak desk, illuminated by the warm lamp lights that lined the circular den. There was a black mass of something that she couldn’t decipher for a moment from the entrance, but she was sure that he was just about to peruse that large book.

“Good evening, Sakura-san,” he greeted, eyes less cold after glossing over the indecipherable symbols on the leather cover.

She greeted him in return, traces of uneasiness apparent on her features.

“Will you like something to read? The books here are mostly old first-edition classics, but they will be moved soon enough. The contemporary collections were the first to go, but I can’t seem to showcase this in my public mansion”

“No, no. It’s fine, I just want to look around while waiting for Ino-cha—”

Her eyes strayed to the book now being hefted open, with pages large enough to swallow the whole length of his work desk. It was like those illustration books she had that Kakashi would read to her when she missed her parents at the dorm, but instead of the caricature images of animals and fae, it was a colossal book of old painted canvases.



“Isn’t it interesting? They were helpful on my brief perusing of revivalist art. It’s quite an expensive one. They’re even written in Russian.”

Slowly, she listened to the soft-spoken, yet succinct stories behind the blown up, black and white images of The Virgin and The Child, a still photograph of a beautiful mural in a cathedral, of an unsmiling princess and a prophetic bird with a pale face of a man, wrapped in ebony night feathers and fiery halo light.

But what drew her eyes—with such inexplicable attention, was the image of men riding the four colored steeds with a black embossed inscription of *Воины Апокалипсиса* that ominously glinted at the side.

“Ah, yes, Viktor was interested in myths and fairytales,” Sai spoke fondly, his hand caressing a gaping maw of the crimson mare almost akin to affection. There were slain men beneath their hooves, the brilliant red crescent peeking behind the dark, translucent clouds and a glowing lamb was perched above all the turmoil.

“The four horsemen.”

Her words were like a piercing scream in the silence of her thoughts.

“The bringers of the end of the world.”

“Yes.” Sai nodded, his eyes closing with mild merriment. “As each of the seals was opened, they came, one by one.” There was a semblance of mystery surrounding his quiet words, barely concealing his enthusiasm about the subject.

“He, the white one, who first brings pestilence...” He tapped the man who sat proudly on his mare, with his bow drawn and crown held high.

“And then, the crimson one comes.” He then drew a path to the red-headed man, his sword raised to behead the struggling soldier beneath him. “Given the power to start wars, robbing peace.”

“But, he who brings the scales, the impartial black one.” Sai hovered his index on the image of the thin, gaunt man with stark-eyed gaze, coated in a thin veneer of anger as he gazed upon the fields of outstretched hands and lifeless bodies. “He brings everyone an all consuming-hunger.”

“Famine.”

“Yes.” His affirmation brought a nervous shiver down her spine. “Then, you know who follows him, this pale horse?”

“He, the pale one.” She swallowed thickly and all she could think of was to run as she gazed at the empty sockets of the haunting skull. From his bony phalanges, he wielded the curved blade on its thin rod. “Deat—”

“Ojichan!”

The shrill call nearly made Sakura jump.



The blonde appeared in the doorway with a mischievous grin. Ino then stopped laughing when she noticed her long-time friend was almost as ashen-colored as her uncle.

“Forehead!” The blinking Ino let out a surprised gasp. “You’re here.”

Sakura breathed deeply, trying not to look frightened. “Hi, pig.”

“Sai?”

“I think it’s good if you two catch up, Beautiful.”

She turned a suspicious baby blue eye to the two of them, pouting her lips a little bit.

“You two look so serious—”

“It’s nothing, Beautiful.” Sai smiled innocently, as the taller woman peered over the two of them with an inquisitive look. “We were just talking about a painting.”

“You and your weird tastes.” Ino paced towards them, now looking at the art book with keen interest. “Nice bods on these men. It’s a gorgeous painting, I must say. Why don’t you draw something more like this?” An elbow jutted playfully to his midrib as Ino giggled.

“It’s just a painting, Ino.”

Sakura gave a nervous smile when the taut atmosphere dissipated, a wan comparison compared to Sai.

VIII.

September 15, 2030 Anno Domini

MIRACLE CROP FUNDED BY THE MILITARY

Mas. Brig. General Sai, head of the Greater Japanese Army, promised to fund the Miracle Crop Research yesterday in a meeting with Haruno Sakura, the project's main researcher. The meeting took place in General Sai's summer rest house located in Shibukawa, Gunma. General Sai and the young Dr. Haruno finalized their contract after hours of negotiations.

“I’m happy to support Sakura-san’s quest to fight famine. It’s an admirable effort,” said General Sai in an interview, “I just hope it’s not a losing battle.”

Haruno Sakura’s laboratories and her research would be transferred to Ebetsu prefecture, owned by the government and funded by highest officials...

There was something different in her new abode.



Granted that her freshly-furnished quarters was designed with an urban, sophisticated ambience, the glam features did nothing but to instill intimidation to her small form. It also gave a foreboding aura, especially since she could feel the shadows deepening as the hours progressed, lurking under the bright strips of light.

It was her first day; the small crimson digits of zero-two-three-zero blinked on the LCD, alarming her to stand up and dress herself with the clothes on top of her baggage. She hadn't even started unpacking her things yet. She threw the starched, past knee-length white coat over her shoulders to hide her simple red tee, slipped on her black stovepipes and open-toed boots while half-running on the corridors.

Even since she started producing the first prototypes of certain pods and seeds, placed in their corresponding Petri dishes for multiple tests, she knew there was a huge probability of failure: that everyone would still suffer from deforestation and natural calamities. Yet, with her current discoveries, the resistance of her crops might even aid a breakthrough in creating a perfect vaccine against all types of human and animal diseases, from the simple cold to the most virulent autoimmune diseases, if she tried enough for a few more years.

A weapon against death.

Punching in the few numbers and sliding her ID in the slot, the door slid automatically with a smooth whirr. Thankful for the cool conditioning of the room, she could see the swift progress of her work as the temperature of the autoclave machines flashed across the monitors on the nearby screen. Absorbed in determining the decrease of the inoculated salmonella on the chosen produce, Sakura took a while before noticing that not a single soul came in her lab.

Normally, she would welcome this kind of peace; no hassles from being interrupted, no distractions. But the stillness had truly disturbed her, as she transferred the fresh batch of agars to the nearby cooler.

It was a bit disconcerting, though. Where were the others? They were supposed to start at exactly three in the morning. The gracious general had wanted to see if the project could exceed the production of ten tons of rice, as well as yeast and vineyards within the span of two weeks. Using rapid growth stimulations along with—

There was an ear-shattering explosion.

Then, the whole place was submerged in a suppressing darkness

He could see her.

In the darkness, where his eyes glowed in an accursed red, Sakura did something unexpected: she sat on the sturdy stool, closing her eyes, trying to calm her apprehensive breaths. Her glazed eyes stared, and he could picture her pupils dilate from the temporary loss of her sight. She didn't stumble on her feet in fear while the alarms caterwauled in deafening echoes. She didn't ramble to herself, a habit she had when scared and alone



when they were children. There she was, in the middle, surrounded by bottles of clear liquids, alcohol and acids.

She seemed resigned to something, patiently waiting for *it* to come to her.

“I was right.” Her eyes were now cool, untouched by tears that filled its brim when he left her without a word—Naruto had told him—appraising him in that clinical detachment he had never seen before. “I had my doubts.”

“Sakura.” Her name on his lips was a greeting and an apology.

“Sasuke.”

“I guess I became so noticeable now.” She laughed a bit, hollow and broken. She now stood from her seat, steady and careful, afraid that he would notice the trembling of her hands as she did so, her small back turned to him. “That I’m already worth killing?”

He only answered with the sound of the cocking pistol, masking his surprise at her calm assessment of her situation. Sakura didn’t seem to mind that she was facing her executioner, with a calm façade nonetheless.

“You shouldn’t have swerved to the right at the very last moment.” Her body faced him, tendrils of firelight illuminating the contours of her face. Her eyes were staring at his hands, the tip still pointing downwards. “If that would free you from them—”

“You don’t know anything,” he hissed.

“Did you see what you’ve done? People are dying in such a pitiful state, they don’t deserve this—”

Sasuke began to laugh derisively, with such broken tiredness that he didn’t bother hiding his amusement anymore.

“You’re still hungry.”

He couldn’t help but lace his words with such nostalgia that Sakura looked up in confusion. She didn’t know how much it truly relieved and stabbed him to know that she never changed. Still hungry for betterment, still in need of him.

“Yes.” But this wasn’t the young Sakura who didn’t understand the meaning behind his words, who was protected, safe and ignorant. “But not for acclaim, or recognition. My life, my decisions were pathetically built around you.”

She raised her arm in a wide sweep, gesturing to all her damned accomplishments, to her efforts in saving a dying humanity.

“I fought this endless famine for you.”

(and here was the woman that he had always craved for, but he would definitely take and take and gnaw her to death.)



She leaned forward, the pink bangs covering her half-closed lids. “I can help you. I will always help you.”

“You don’t understand, Sakura,” he viciously snarled when her curled knuckles relaxed, lowering her guard to him; when her tight expression eased, as if she was assuming that he couldn’t blow her head off with one shot of his exploding bullet. He nearly bit off a curse because of that stupid trusting naivety she never lost. Beads of perspiration began to trail a path on his temples as the heat increased by each passing second.

“You are a stupid fool...” he spoke harshly, “to trust me.”

(unbidden visions flashed before his eyes as naruto, the ever clairvoyant, relayed their supposed to be fairytale ending: him and sakura, with their backs turned to watch the sky burning in waves of orange as the moon turned red.)

His hands trembled, shaking from the tips of the phalanges to the joints of his wrist.

(naruto told a different outcome of this moment. sasuke would cut off his six wings; he would take her far away from here, keeping her safe, as the cycle would unfold its last phase: a round boy with a foxy grin would rebel and leave the threshold of their fates to deliver the frail humankind to its end.)

Most thought of Sakura as a saint, but he knew better.

“All I ever needed was for you to see me!” Because all these weren’t for humanity’s sake.

And he realized that here was Sakura. A human.

Mortal.

Because of him.

The metal was cold, deathly cold on his hand.

He knew soon enough, her skin would be as cold as well.

There was an explosive shot.

(and he would always see her everywhere, alive. away from this fucked up world, where god could never find her, never at the reach of the coming death. and with the thought of her life being spared, his soul would be satiated to the fullest.)

“Sasuke—” Globules of blood spouted out from her pale lips, now glistening with a stain of red, a color that never seemed to touch her lips before. Like thick wine, it dribbled across her chin. “—kun.”

The bright blood gnawed the white cloth slowly, consuming rich red on her paling hands. And her arms—wide, open, accepting—crumpled in a bent angle, clutching



at the middle of her torso, where the spreading stain was stark on the clean fabric. She collapsed on the floor, failing to fall onto him.

It probably took a minute—but it felt like forever—when he lowered himself to the ground.

When he brushed the tendrils of her hair away from the corners of her smiling lips, he remembered the visions, his hopeful dreams; and knew that Sakura at least deserved this sweet repose, rather than see the world crumbling under Naruto's hand, imprisoned. She would never rest until everyone was saved.

Until he was at peace. And that would never happen.

She deserved to be free from this hell hole called life.

And for once, he satiated his hunger and took a bite of *his* forbidden fruit.

XI.

October 10, 2030 Anno Domini

MIRACLE CROP INVENTOR DIES, RESEARCH DESTROYED IN FIRE

JAPAN—Sakura Haruno, 20, Bioengineering Specialist, died inside the Innovation Fields Laboratories Incorporated in Ebetsu Prefecture. An accidental gas leak was what the forensics uncovered after a week of full-scale investigation.

Haphazard debris lay scattered as volunteers tried to salvage the remains of the facility. Though there was no extensive damage in the surrounding areas, ten workers were severely burnt, buried for five hours beneath the rubble. Miss Haruno, who was working overnight inside her study located near the gas tanks, received the full extent of the explosion. Her body was not found, but there were confirmed DNA traces of her dried blood, leaving the suspicion that the arson was initiated to cover up a murder.

Known as a young scientist in the inner circles of biochemical societies, Miss Haruno was a freshman medical student in Harvard University...

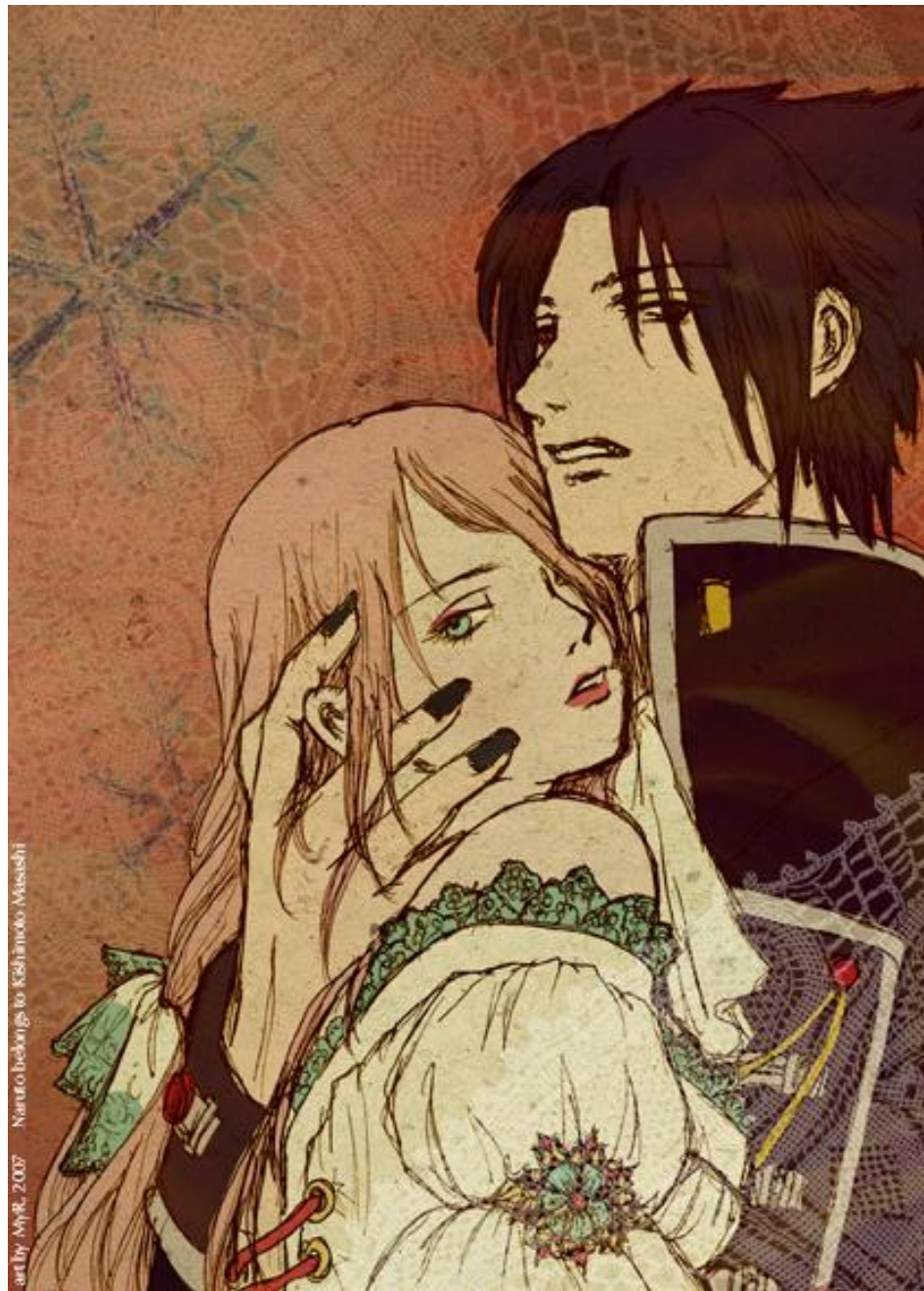
Lamentations

Marīa,

A chorus of phantom shrieks filled her crowded mind.

grātia plēna,





Alone in a deserted pew, there was a woman with a pair of petal lips and two

river-green eyes nearly hidden beneath thick lashes. Distinctive rosy curls, tinted to an almost burning gold was unbound from the throttle of vanity, a soft silk tie and a bouquet of punishing bobbies on her hair. The late morn light cast a lugubrious image of a mourning girl before the effigy of a blessed lady, clothed in a robe made of moon and crowned with a halo of stars, the world under her feet.

Dóminus t́ecum.

Pale hands and mouth, both firmly pressed together, were trembling for a long time now. She could barely stay still; the thin organza of her nightgown was not enough to cushion the pressure of kneeling. But fear and desperation were enough to invigorate a famished body, as she fervently pleaded for a...a miracle, anything. Anything.

Bened́icta tu

She could not even hear her own prayer as *their* shrieks grew lustier, almost threading themselves on her consciousness. Finally, she screamed.

“i-in muliéribus, et bened́ictus fŕuctus...”

And there was a moist warmth that coated the sides of her throat, a heat that sluiced over her frigid veins. A tightening grasp was on her waist; she could hardly breathe.

Her name *Sakura* muted out the cries of the souls, and all she could think of was that he was giving her air back as he exhaled through his mouth.

“véntris túi...”

And as there was not even a whisper of a breeze, much less the recurring voices that drove her to insanity, she relished his gift of tranquility.

i. I did not know the lament yet

“Where are we?”

Weary and heavily wounded, the contemptuous half-groan was his first words when he awoke.

“Lord Haruno,” came the relieved sigh from his carrier, as the youngling—Inuzuka, was it?—galloped across the empty, rough road with a brown steed.

The knights understood the unrestrained venting of the *Észak* Earl, and they were wise enough not to speak while their respected noble rambled as their chestnut horses trampled on the grassy plains in swift vigilance.

“Such impudence!”

“If I should speak, Your Grace,” said the calm young soldier, who he



remembered as the sole knight in the Nara family. “Our reinforcements made sense. Besides, His royal highness also sought your safety above and foremost since your brother had perish—”

“You think of the best for me when my brother just died and was slain in battle? Is it best,” he roared again for the nth time during the rolling ride, “to scamper like a hound with a tail between my legs? To deny me of the same honor—”

His almost vulgar tirades were cut off with a sharp gasp of pain.

The rear guard, Sir Aburame, prompted to tighten his knees and whipped his reins, as the older man applied pressure on the seeping injury with threadbare rags. Fortunately, shouts from the distant battle and the steady galloping of their horses drowned out further irritated murmurs.

These two soldiers, still apprehensive, were assigned to protect the Lord of the Haruno House as he returned back to the barricaded bailey perched above the nearby hillocks.

With the task of ensuring that he would receive immediate treatment as soon as possible, the situation resulted into a heated argument in the sea of flying projectiles and clashing blades. However, the elderly King was resolute in his order that the youngest son-in-law should retreat.

Their aggrieved lord, despite old age, had fairly impressed their people as he traded the ostentatious garments and glamour in the high court for a well-made blade to fight the damned conquest against the bronze-skinned pagans. It was a remarkable decision, as the duke had already distanced himself from such battles. But no matter how welcomed his invaluable experience was in the rejuvenated troops, the frontlines of a tumultuous clash was not a place for aging warriors, whether they were of king’s kin or not.

It was indeed fortunate that the muttering lord was favored by fate, spared from death when the newest, recruited official—some unknown captain—had noticed that the old man was within the aim of the enemy spear; the moment the spike grazed his weak shoulder, a young, tall man with an unfamiliar coat of arms on his shield lugged him and went to the King instantly, bearing news that the Earl should be taken away from the huge skirmish.

Considerably relieved for a moment, the three reached the edge of the moat safely. Blowing an old bony horn, the metal drawbridge creaked down slowly to allow them inside the small bastion.

“Bring a practitioner,” bid the ragged knight to an attending squire as he took off his visor. “Lord Haruno is injured.”

The thin, small body was gone in a flash as he ran towards the small gathering of ladies in white aprons. A minute not too late, he brought a veiled woman who carried a wooden basin upon her bosom, disentangling herself from the band of bustling middle-



aged acolytes. In quick strides, the youngest—he assumed her as about six and a decade year old by her small form—reached the exhausted soldier who called for her and was swiftly informed of the situation.

“He caught a sustaining injury from a lance.”

“Any chances there are pieces left inside?”

“No, the wound was cleaned, but we dare not move his shoulder. It might be broken—”

The stern woman was dressed in an old green gown, with tattered lace bell-sleeves and a dark hazel corset. A stained trowel hung on her thin arms, as well as a bulky leather kidney pouch on her belt. She suddenly stopped in front of the old man who just descended from his saddle, supported by the men, his worn face creasing a small smile.

“I am in your debt, healer. Just—” His voice stilled when he noticed a vibrant strand from the edge of her faded liripipe.

The bright rose color was quite a conspicuous contrast to the dull white wimple that secured her features.

If he was angry earlier, now he was practically livid.

“What in the bloody heavens are you doing here?”

The young lady raised her head, meadow green eyes meeting furious viridian ones. With a waspish glare, she bristled adamantly. “There are many people who are in need of my aid.”

“I told you to stay behind the abbey, foolish girl! There is a reason why—”

“Yes, that might be a reasonable choice.” She extracted the stained rags away from the weeping, red hole, and then motioned the armed men to assist the protesting old man to a brick bungalow with dried straw roof, where an empty bunk was available. “But do you even dare to withhold my skills in such a dire situation?”

He opened his mouth in objection, but she cut in sharply.

“No protests.”

Paternal instincts told him that he should be scolding her wayward actions, but common sense fairly dictated that it was better to discuss this when he was not bleeding to death.

“Alright.” His jaw ticked a muscle in response. “Lead the way.”

As they trudged on towards the waiting doors, he was settled in a comfortable cot. He unbuckled the straps off his broad sword and handed it to the waiting boy who reached for it.

“You were.” The cheeky smile on her face could have brightened up any battle-



worn soul, as the men gave a respectful nod and trudged out of the room. Settling the wooden basin on the stool, she started wringing the cloth with force. “And still are, dearly missed at home, father.”

An urge to engulf his only daughter in an embrace arose, but he thought the better of it when she passed by the open window, probably gazing at the injured soldiers that had traipsed inside the keep.

“Make sure you at least reside in the capital before I go back,” he said gruffly, as she unstapled the metal gauntlets with an outstretched hand. “I fear that those vermin would choose this station next, as it is the nearest point.”

“Who said something about returning? We still need to make sure nothing is broken. And, your worries are unfounded.” Her tremulous laughter soothed not only the stinging pain of herbs lathered on the wound, but also the stirrings of anxiety. “I know how to wield an axe and take out some rouge or two.”

“It is such a relief to see your face.”

“Shush,” she admonished, rolling her eyes at that sentimental tone. He tended to be overdramatic, and honestly, could she blame him when he dealt with death every night?

“Let me work in silence and stay still. I need to bind this. This is not good; your aim is going to suffer because of this dislocation.” As the sun reared down its waning head slowly from the clouded sky, the young woman sighed as she finally finished her work. “Give it a few hours, then you can surely stand. Just don’t rush it—”

Her next words were forgotten as she heard the faint dirge-like cadence, followed by gradual clopping sounds from weary horses and swollen murmurs of gentle ladies who lingered beside the entrance of the small room.

Her father conveyed caution wordlessly, grasping the tiny, warm hand and frowned in warning.

In response, she tightened her hold.

Then a booming call, piercing the taut silence, came from the nearby turret. What came next was an explosion of ear-splitting shouts. She could hear the clinks of chains that were being rotated on a wheel; the bridge was being brought down to let the army in.

With a flurry of stained skirts, she ran towards the open pane. From a good distance, there was the familiar banner, its frayed red-white-green stripes still waving triumphantly in the wind, held by a young page boy with a wide-toothed grin. Behind the flag bearer was a sight to see, as hundred files of men—with grime-covered gloves, brandishing spears and blades—entered the drawbridge. A swarm of people were now gathering towards the released steel gates, shouting names in joy.

Even though, her identical voice supplied rather negatively inside her head, *it is*



certain that there are casualties.

“They won?” Turning to her father, there was a happiness that she could not express by a mere smile. “We are safe!”

But her father was quiet; staring at her with what was an obvious disbelief.

“Father?” she asked, disturbed with his strange incredulous expression. Without any further contemplation at the uncomfortable aura that surrounded the room, she turned her gaze back to the raucous noise outside as the weary iron-clad cavalry filled the ancient fort.

“Sakura?”

Her eyes caught the vision of a black steed that stood out in the midst of the crowd. Faint dark marks splotched the hazel saddle, the creature was still like a mahogany statue as if waiting.

There was no rider, but as it geared its head towards her, the eyes sparked an ugly crimson tint. In instinct, she recoiled away from the window.

Her fear was probably apparent on her face; and so she leveled her expression into a mild-mannered calm.

Someone rapped at the door in three brief, rapid knocks.

“Enter.”

As the battle-worn man instructed, the door opened and allowed a young man dressed in dark leathery armor in. His broadsword was fastened on his hips, and a thin blade was slung on his back, only held by thick animal skin. The stranger was already unbuckling the straps of his headgear but was interrupted with an infuriated shout.

“You!” her father exclaimed in fury, raising his brows nearly to his receding hairline.

She immediately lowered the pointed and injured arm, obviously agitated with the display of temper.

The newcomer merely entered with two steps, his visage obscured with a metal helmet. She could see the definite shape of his smooth and white chin at his curt nod, as well as the thin line of his pale lips. It deepened at its sides, forming a grimace.

“I have come here for your pardon.” The timbre of his voice was clear, smooth and low, deceptively courteous in its condescending monotone. “Your Grace, I believe that it was the best course of action.”

“Or to gloat your victory?” her father snidely interjected. “As I told you, I am not inept of—”

“—of fighting ten men more, while struggling for breath,” the man finished blandly.



As he nodded his head and leaned forward in an unmistakable respectful bow, Sakura thought that she saw few dark raven strands fall from the edges of the metal.

“Sir.” She did not know why, but there was something that made her stand on her feet and take an intimidating walk towards him. “He is resting. I suggest you leave and talk of the matters later.”

“No, Sakura, leave him be! I want to know how he—”

“Rest!” She whipped her head back in annoyance, which gladly made him stop. She then returned her attention back to the young man. “Please leave this instant, sir.”

He gave her an appraising stare, black marbles glittering obscurely behind the open slits. She did not back down, as there was an intimidating force that tried to dissuade her resolve in making him leave. And then he turned his back and began to retreat, but not without any stinging parting words.

“Either way, you would not die by their hands. They would only ask for ransom,” their unwelcome visitor merely said. “An unnecessary distraction for the King.”

“Are you saying that I cannot handle myself? Why you insolent—”

But then, he could not continue to ramble on degrading obscenities as the visitor had closed the door.

“Who was he?”

“He’s the braggart who forced me to fall back,” he indignantly added in between gritted teeth. “A distraction!”

As Sakura resumed in reprimanding her father to tend the swollen injury, she could only regret that she forgot to ask his name.

ii. from my light | separate me

In the pinnacle of raucous merrymaking, Sakura was still reluctant to leave her quarters.

With a bit of quick thinking, the young lady managed to come up with an excuse to delay herself from attending the said feast: telling her handmaidens about an unpacked luggage and a miserable headache. They willingly obliged to leave her some space, and granted her request to depart from the lavish lands as soon as the feast ended.

Her hands were already trembling and she nearly swayed on her feet, exhausted. It took an unending effort to stay inside the crowded abbeys for the wounded. Eleven excruciating days already passed as she had guaranteed the recovery of his troops, leaving herself famished.

She was already wishing of returning to her small, homely country manor, or



even back to the mainland to continue her training as a true practitioner.

It was a selfish notion, but that was only human of her (she was not a saint, though she almost led a life of one). Besides, her father had been sent home two months ago, and he had demanded that she would not go outside the strongholds in his absence.

Despite the attempt to avoid the court, the High Lord of the Kingdom summoned her to join the festivities after they won the west borders within half a year; the young woman had no choice but to comply. Not knowing how she managed to change to her attire of a clean chiffon chemise and soft silk bodice of deep turquoise, there was only a distant memory of being ushered by her attendant in haste till she reached the doors, with the sleepy pallbearers announcing her name to an expecting crowd.

As soon as she descended the grindstone stairs, her calloused hands were honored when the cupbearer handed her the silver-plated goblet bearing the insignia of her maternal clan.

She retracted herself from the shadows of the tapestries decorating the clay brick walls, trying to steel herself to approach his unguarded back.

“Your Highness.” Sakura approached with a serene smile on her face, handing the triumphant head of the house his plain, lustrous goblet. “I give you my salutations.”

A pleasant smile smoothed his creasing features before he responded easily, “Thank you, dear.”

He accepted the cup with both hands wrapping around the handle, keeping a thoughtful expression. Sakura decided to wait for him before approaching the subject.

“How are the men?” Taking a sip of ale from the cold rim, he eyed her with curiosity.

Thinking it was best to approach the matter gradually, she complied.

“They are being treated well, sir.” Her lips formed a smile.

“How about you, dear? Your education in the courts has been well, I hope?” He leaned forward, his brow furrowed as the King met those green eyes. “Will you stay here for a while till the end of winter?”

Sakura nearly fumbled with the sudden question that her grandfather asked her.

“It’s still early. Mingle with the age of your sort.” The old, weary ruler chortled, noticing that she was still wary in staying longer in the castle. His mottled hand waved her off towards the crowd. “Think about my request and may it help change your mind.”

She did not have the heart to dissuade his order and ask for permission to retire in the quarters. Besides, as the most favored granddaughter, she knew that it would be rude for her to leave the festivities.

The old King had only two daughters, without any sons, depriving him of any heir till the birth of the single grandson from the eldest daughter. But still, it was no



secret that both deceased women were dear to the King. Her resemblance to the youngest princess—may her mother rest forevermore in peace—was uncanny similar in so many ways.

From the fall of her bright rose tresses, the resolute glints of her green eyes, and her headstrong yet caring temperament, she was indeed more of a daughter of a king than a mere duchess. Lady Haruno proved this, as she bore her exhaustion with a grace that only a lady of the dignified court could: with her chin upright, her spine ramrod straight, and her smile belying the strain she was enduring.

The successor of the crown though, had taken more from his deceased father. But it could not be denied that he was the more viable one to take the throne. He was more than capable of taking the position despite his carefree ways, and his frequent absences during festive ceremonial evenings like tonight.

It was a shame, though. He was more of a court jester rather than a powerful heir. Well, Sakura could understand his distaste of such events since the veiled animosities and falsities were ever so potent, though subtly hidden in such a celebratory environment.

Every neck and limb of the invited—each patrician and their subservient alike—were adorned with baubles of great finery. Their trinkets were made up of malleable metals and embedded stones as huge as hails. Gossip-mongering women were clad in ermine fur and patterned silks as they gathered in small circles at the edges of the hall. Their husbands, on the other hand, were drinking merrily while seated on the long tables filled with arrays of silverware.

Multi-colored containers were either loaded with tender meats, well-mixed sallats, hot broths, or fresh pears and apples accompanied by some rare almonds. As the court members entertained themselves, the minstrels continued to breathe on the lutes and tweaked on the strings of vielles for those who preferred to remain solitary or dance along the intertwining harmonious music.

As she wandered to the balustrades in an attempt to conceal herself from the others, she began to presume that their sovereign was now seeking nobles and gents alike.

She faintly saw the murky white streaked hair weaving its way around the galley, confirming that he was currently giving leather pouches filled with gold coins to the brave knights that had won the latest campaign on the *Vest Mare* territories. Unlike most conquerors that seized most of the spoils, most of the Haruno Hall's riches were well-distributed to the serfs. Hence, it was not surprising for the duchess to be occasionally sent to the local convent in her younger years.

Her thoughts drifted to her father again, as disorganized as her mind was that night, making her unaware to a great surprise when the horn caught her attention.

Everyone kept to their silence, as the booming voice of the door warden announced an unfamiliar name, entitled as an honorable captain that lead their armies to a glorious victory.



It prompted the crowd to buzz in an expected energy as a tall individual stepped out from the archway, his features strange from the people who lived in the plains. He was pale and unmarked, yet he was covered in black mink on his head and snake leather on his feet, with traces of the darkest *lapis lazuli* on his now discarded cloak from his shoulders to reveal coarse breeches. His raven strands were straight and he had a surprisingly clean, shaven face, making him very youthful despite his imposing height.

It seemed that she was not the only one who wondered about him. The questions rippled through the room, despite her scanty mingling with the hushed hearsays, increasing her moderate interest.

In a quick observation, her roving glance saw that a couple of scarred men gazed at him with their countenance tensing when he passed them. Most of the younger soldiers were avoiding his stare, but they did speak to him briefly when the necessity arose.

While torn to observe him and listen to the incessant chattering, she was surprised at the lack of information about the new company. For nay, not even a murmur was said of his existence in court before—most especially about the circulating news of being an extremely talented captain under her King's employ.

By this time, the interesting young guest had abandoned the pretense to speak with anyone, opting instead to stand silent as the evening went on. It fueled the speculations—told in dulcet whispers—as they noticed the respect their king held for the newcomer: he was probably a disgraced duke in another land, the hushed murmurs told her. He had sought refuge in their borders, started out as a ragged prisoner who fought till he became a wise, though temporarily, advisor to the Northern King.

But there must be a price, she suspiciously concluded, if the rapidly-spreading rumors were true.

“That fine young lad,” another richly-clad, plump drunk woman said, gobbling up the fresh wine loquaciously as she joined in the conversation in a ruckus, “resembles one of those sons in *Sudest Munti*, that he is.”

Was her assumption correct? He probably lived in *eternal winter*, as the old superstitious mystics would always say, the evidence shown by the pallid color of his skin. But why was he here? Men from the South never dared to step on the soil of the flat lands no matter how dire the circumstances were.

“The elderly boyars sold off their strongest warriors to the neighboring enemies,” another piped up in the group, stick-thin and more inebriated as well. “I assume their hefty price is enough for their councilors to secure their tenure over the lands.”

“But I have heard that he was an extreme barbarian in his methods—”

“That barbarian you have spoken of had flattened those who dared to oppose us,” a stiff noble interjected harshly in a low voice, slightly terrified that their voices might be carried to the end of hall where their subject was. “He is not a mere knight, you



nitwit. Not only is he considered a hero, he is probably as blue-blooded as your pompous veins.”

As he said this, the women finally caught a flash of metal pinned on his chest, as well as that small signet ring among the simple silver bands, glinting innocently on his smallest finger.

A nervous silence filled the room, dispelled suddenly by a single whine of a string.

“By heavens, did he come from a noble line?” They quivered their fans and lowered their heads to her with an excited gleam in their greedy eyes. “He is probably a prince in exile! Is not that quite romantic? What do you think of it?”

It was not farfetched to think that he could also be a prince, seeing that the ring did not resemble a crest of any house in the kingdom, yet the mere idea to procure his attention for such a reason was preposterous. *There is no romance in exile*, she almost retorted to these twittering ladies and their ridiculous cone-shaped headdresses. But she drew in a ragged breath, shook her head and merely smiled, deciding to pull her gaze away from the rigid back of that mysterious guest.

But she never had the chance to do so when the singular raven-haired man shifted his head.

An eye returned her curious gaze, held her petrified in place.

No, there was nothing of the old wives’ anecdotes that described the symptoms of infatuations—that there would be no presence of time, that her heart would be caught in between her throat, or that a small current of thunder would run through her spine.

It was nothing like that.

Instead, there was something that made everything feel right, yet terribly wrong at the same time. He made her want to stay frozen like this, while she was being swallowed whole with his—dare she say domineering?—stare. The seconds did decide to trickle in a faltering pace, but it did not stop while his whole face slowly turned to her.

“Madame Haruno?” Their soft voices stirred her away from the gripping trepidation that held her, trapped and mesmerized in the abrupt melding of warmth and cold behind her chest. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she breathed out, flashing peridot-shaded irises back to where she saw him staring at her. Yet that seemed impossible, as he was now silently listening to the conversation in front of him. There was no indication that he even acknowledged her presence.

“The carriage has been waiting for three hours!” Shizune, one of her handmaidens, blustered in swiftly, as she was ushered towards the end of the hall. “You have been awake since dawn, what were you thinking?”

“No.” She found herself shaking her head, resignation to accept her



grandfather's request. "I shall stay here as long as my King needs me."

"What? But child, your father—"

"He managed to get along when I was gone for a year," she retorted easily, as the lady-in-waiting was, again, trying to change her mind. "A few months would be okay, besides the King beseeches my continued presence."

"But goodness, you must retire early then." There was another round of Shizune fretting over her as she smoothed the strawberry locks away from her face, devoid of any pressed powder and rouge. "You look easy on the eyes, dear, but I can see those shadows on your face. Off to bed."

The nonsensical remonstrations went on, swelling in admonitions while Sakura left the feast unnoticed, her mind clear of anything except for the thought of what on earth was she doing. Surely, her father would throw a fit, but maybe he would understand after a few days.

Seconds later, a pair of slate eyes flickered to her recently emptied spot.

iii. Withdraw her from her pain!

Three moon cycles passed as she resided in the spacious brick-wall castle, waiting for news of her father's recuperation. Already longing for home, she sighed miserably, for life in the royal court was, unfortunately, dreadful.

Sakura rather expected too much that something would *happen*. Granted that wishing for trouble was unspeakable, she was becoming rather listless. The days were too tame for her usual standards, compared to her gallivanting to foreign places to learn from brilliant minds across the seas of the North, amidst the protest of her scandalized, bigoted distant relatives. If it was not for the fact that she was dedicated to a cause and was respected by the clergymen, she would have been labeled as a rebel—or worse, a courtesan.

Thus, she patiently waited for the pained moans and pitiful cries from the afflicted, which would definitely keep her busy enough. But as time went by, the castle walls became absent of any violent uprising or secret sieges. The rustle and bustle of needlework replaced the clangs and hiss of blades especially now that the freezing stone manor was in serious need of thicker clothing and draperies; autumn was already at hand and winter nearing.

Ensnaring chains of hearsays proliferated heavily, since the household help only had this as leisure during the idle breaks in between the dishes and stable work. Although she had no intention of participating in it, they continued to fill her in with the news.

"—arguing on territorial regions?"



“Squabbling and bantering over a piece of land, but how can they—”

As the thin steel emerged from the sea of cloth from its fiftieth stitch, she was roused with a call.

“Somebody came to see you, my lady. Lord Uzu—”

“Let him in,” she said without looking to the doors, busy in threading the next pattern.

And in came a young man blessed by the sun, dressed loosely in his tucked dress shirt and worn breeches. In a stunned response at his sudden visit, everyone stood up from their seats in courtesy as the highest lady in the room was suddenly engulfed in a bear hug, making her catch her breath in strangled laughter.

“Naruto!” Her lightened expression wiped out every trace of her boredom.

“Domesticated?” He guffawed, crinkling the beaming lines on his tanned face. “This is definitely a first.”

“Really now.” Raising a slim eyebrow, she was amused as he seemed to be happier in the presence of maidens who kept on tattling as he unmanly waved his arms in excitement.

Finally getting a good look at her cousin, the little details now became stark on his colored skin; she noticed the white lines and remnants of dirt scattered along his arms.

“Lord Uzumaki.” The ladies managed a half-bow with a graceful nod, respectfully ignoring the two’s rather enthusiastic conversation.

“There is no battle ongoing, right? It was all over,” her voice was terribly calm, arms dropping to her sides with her fingers clenched over the terrain of tartan cloth on her sleeves. “Why are there new scars on you? And bandages! Are you still fighting? I thought that—”

“It’s not a battle that is directly connected to us, but yes.” His smile dropped a notch, stirring the afternoon light on his shadowed face. “There were a couple of dues to be paid.”

“And they were?”

He rolled his eyes at the probing questions.

“You really are keen when it comes to the these things.” There was resignation in his voice as he picked up the fallen embroidered quilt. “If I were you, I would stop worrying and just enjoy myself here.”

“And what do you think should I do here?”

“Be a lady for once? But I think you do it very badly.”

“If you dare mock me one more time, I will slay you with my needle.”



“How about I accompany you around the grounds?”

“No need, I’d prefer to be undisturbed.”

As she was speaking, she finally realized that her visitor was not alone. She noticed an outline of a shadow, leaning casually against the far windowsill outside her open door.

She could feel impatience rolling off from the seemingly familiar young man, though she could not see the shadowed features, hindered by the glare of the bright sun. His skin was unnaturally pale, and had she seen that formal stance somewhere?

The sudden ruffle on her hair by the towering blond halted her from remembering.

“Should you be going?” Recovering from her daze, she gave a final embrace as he went to the door.

“Oh, I need to go to the old man now.” With a grin, Naruto added, “But remember, I don’t want you cooping yourself here. Go outside!”

She grimaced, her wandering thoughts forgotten. “You just want me to get in trouble again.”

“Have it your way then.” Lightening up her morning, her cousin, the lone grandson of the respectable Uzumaki House—the crown prince—laughed out in mirth as he exited the room, almost obscuring the sound of her closing door.

Though, she could not get rid of the feeling that the dark-haired companion already left as well. And there were black eyes that were, somehow, watching her every movement.

iv. My sweet delight

Night had nearly befallen the grounds, but the young woman still lingered in the herbal patches inside the walled gardens. Fragrant leaves of agrimonies and wild peppermint teased her nose, deeming it a fair exchange for an aching back when she had procured a considerable amount of leaves to be brewed for the whole month. With her wise old handmaiden, Shizune, they were about to retreat to the lower kitchens when she was greeted with an urgent missive, bursting in the tiny pen and nearly bowling over a bed of lilies.

Lady Haruno! The message rang clearly in her ears as she brushed the remnants of soil and thorns that clung at the edges of her apron. *His highness calls for your presence for the early supper. In haste, please.*

Her heart thumped against her ribcage, knowing that she had left the castle parameters with a stead.



He always called for her, which was quite understandable for the most favorable granddaughter. Their concern would either be about her tempestuous father or her Grand Aunt Tsunade, who would send her more lessons about healing. But those conversations took place before retiring for the night, with a mug of hot cider in the mess room.

This sudden change made her guts twist painfully in trepidation.

Ill news. That was all she could surmise from the summon.

She arrived in the corridors when the horizon was already painted with burning gold and faded velvet. She fixed the linen circlet over her veil with a damp hand and an exasperated tug, the edges of the brown frock she wore were covered in black soot and red earth as she stepped inside the corridors.

She curbed the urge to be unladylike—like stride over the last steps in one big leap.

Standing before the doors within a minute, Sakura paused for a deep breath as her name was announced by the page boy. Inclining her head slightly in respect, the elderly King sat at the table, food laid untouched as he talked to the young man—Uchiha, she remembered from the maids—who sat at the right side of the table bathed with the soft glow of the fireplace behind them.

“Your Highness,” she said pleasantly, the sight that welcomed her instantly dousing her insides with frost and flame at the same time. “Forgive me for my delay.”

Both gazes of dark smoke and waning viridian focused on her. A silence stretched for a mile before a smile lightened up her grandfather’s face.

“Thank you, my dear. Please have a seat.”

As she hurriedly took her place on the left, facing across their silent guest, her King prompted to speak again, “He was not properly introduced to you in the festivities last time, I presume?” Gesturing her towards the silent man, he then spoke the title that was withheld from her during the last celebrations, “Sakura, this is the son of my dear friend Lord Fugaku, bless his soul. He is the last remaining Duke of *Havaselve* and Count of the Southern Alps. And surprisingly, a fine gentleman from the Knights of the Red Moon.”

“Sasuke Uchiha.” The young man, who probably had the truest blood of the Southern Kings deep within his marrows, tilted his chin to her in response.

A prince.

“Sakura Haruno.” Her composure held despite the fact that she was swathed in mud and he was impeccable in his attire. As that thought crossed to her mind, red faintly stained the apples of her cheeks. It was hard to ignore that even in the simplest of breeches and coat, he was appealing. The young man, thankfully, was facing away from her as he conversed with her grandfather.

For some reason, there was a nervous stirring at the bottom of her gut as they



carried on with their conversation. It was unusual to feel intimidated by a certain presence despite knowing that he was not paying attention to her.

Her grandfather noticed her uncharacteristic silence as well, as he kept darting his teal eyes at her in apparent puzzlement. She did not even acknowledge those worried gazes, pondering instead on the number of small smooth stones on the wall behind the young man.

As the meal went on, the anxiety dwindled down to the back of her mind, content in listening to the harmless discussions about trade routes.

“I am really pleased with this unexpected visit. Surely you would like to join my court for a game?”

Though she feigned inattention, surprisingly, her ears were attuned to his reply.

“Pardon me, Your Highness. I need to attend to some matters.” It was a vague, indifferent reply. She could not understand why he seemed to avoid her gaze too.

With that, Sasuke paced away without even a glance back. And Sakura was drawn unconsciously to a trance from the sight of his fading back.

“He just came from your estates.”

That statement interrupted her thoughts, already reading the nuance behind that statement.

“What does he want?” Her shoulders tensed at this. It was preposterous that a stranger who just learned her name just went to her home.

“You owe him your gratitude.” Dropping a lower notch to his usually reedy voice, the King continued while wrapping a mottled hand over her unexpectedly rough calluses. “The lad saved your father from a meaningless death. If I am not mistaken, you met him once in the sick bay?”

Then, she finally remembered the tall man that had a condescending glare, invidious even behind a rusty visor.

“But why did he go to my home?”

“He asked for...” There was a slight querulous look that lingered on the tired stare. “...your hand.”

Sakura opened her mouth, tried to speak, but only a nearly strangled sound came out.

The King was quick to assimilate the problem, soothing the bristling atmosphere that surrounded his granddaughter.

“From what I have gathered, Lord Uchiha gave a hefty deal when your father refused. In my opinion, it is worth deliberating. But no, your father is right—” As expected, her father would be a fuming dolt with this sudden development. “You are



worth more than an alliance. It is your decision though. Neither will I require you to answer his proposal, but I shall not pretend that this offer is truly favorable. And do you not think that he is rather a fine—”

“You frighten me sometimes, grandfather. Do you fancy him?”

“Dear child.” There was a shrewd smile that made Sakura curse inwardly. “I think I am not the one who fancies him.”

With a sharp intake of breath, she nearly stumbled while escaping with a mortified flush on her cheeks.

Extremely amused, his grisly laughter resonated through the halls.

She dearly hoped that Lord Uchiha did not hear, for her dignity’s sake.

v. Take me, death

Contrary to popular belief, Lady Haruno was not naïve.

She was raised in the convent and privately trained by her the well-known spinster, a motherly Senju Archduchess, in the boundaries of her own home. Her education was solely enviable, as no woman could obtain such knowledge and be given the power of mendicancy, never once was she deprived of the inner workings of the political court. She learnt enough, knew enough—the intricacies and intentions behind every gesture, the polite remarks hiding the venomous meanings. Sakura knew that it was purely political strategy, with an intention to intimidate, or worse, to exonerate certain privileges from a powerful country.

It was already late tea when she sought his presence in the stately citadel. He raised his bent head from the dusty pages that lay open on his lap. She stood before him, her pleated hair perfectly done, with a tray of tea and cakes and a serene smile on her face, a picture of a woman in complete obeisance.

“Lord Uchiha.”

When he rose from the seat, he did it impressively, as his height made him more daunting. Tearing her teal gaze away from the leather cover, she braced herself in meeting his eyes.

“Tell me a good reason why I should marry you.”

Sakura cautiously turned her gaze away, uncomfortable with the pregnant silence.

That small action made her miss the simple raise of an eyebrow.

“Such a mere marriage will not be enough to strengthen alliances.” She was trying to emulate his nonchalance. “What can you possibly gain?”



“A wife.” He parried her blunt words with a sharp tongue. “And in turn, you will have my fealty and allegiance.”

At that, she could not say anything else but blatant disbelief.

“I cannot believe you.”

He inclined his head, the allusion behind his words not lost to her.

“You will not threaten me, sir.” Nothing belied her rankled position except her calm words. “My country is not weak. And you have the audacity to imply it so? You have been freed from your captivity by sheer circumstance of need.”

“You listen well, Lady Haruno.”

The flush spread to her cheeks, towards the edges of her dimpled shoulders; her nostrils flared, probably in repressed anger. But when he smirked, he probably knew the reason behind the radiating heat on her face: it was rather disgraceful for a learned woman of her stature, raised painstakingly in the holy grounds, to degrade herself to listen to servant gossip.

The last thing that she needed was for this man—anyone, she added hastily—to think less of her.

Her lips opened, but she could not think of any defense.

Instead, she asked again.

“Why me, Lord Uchiha?” There was no intensity in her words. “Do you know what my plans are after I leave the castle? In a few weeks time, I’m going to accept my holy vocation—”

“I know.”

Her throat closed off and she stared distantly towards the windows, trying not to think too much of the thawing stare that seemed to find its way more frequently on her.

But why...why her?

He could not possibly *not* know.

Everyone knew that sixteen years was already too old for matrimony, as women were obligated to be carted to men by the time she was old enough to bleed. If the rite of passage to womanhood already passed for a year, there was a lesser chance that her womb would bring forth a son.

“It’s too late, Lord Uchiha.”

I cannot bear you an heir.

She could have spoken that out loud, but that was like admitting defeat.

“I will never allow myself to be tied to such marriage.” Her courage grew, as she drew herself to her full height. She might be petite, but her head was raised high enough



to tell him that her choice was honorable. “I’d rather be in the abbey to help other unfortunate souls.”

There was a cynical chuckle, almost unheard, a soft little rumble that disturbed the tranquility of the room.

“I am only giving you an option.”

He rose from his seat, the surprising coolness of his skin soothing on her heated hand as he took the tray from her shaking grasp.

“Good evening, Lady Haruno.”

That night, she remained in her room, quiet contemplation diminishing her appetite. Her refusal to satiate her hunger was met with the protests of her chamber maidens, but there were more pressing things for her to deliberate.

Because the name Haruno signified being part of ancient nobility, Sakura had fine trousseaus settled on her; an inheritance that spanned a terrain of small valleys, protected by the natural mountainous landscape of the borders, far from the vicinity of capitals and merchants.

But when Sakura was a child, all she wanted was to be normal. However, she could not deny her heritage, discerning with her young mind that it was inevitable that she would live a different path from other girls. Although like any aspiring six year old, she was ordained to follow an ancient practice of royal ladies and peasant lasses alike: to collect trinkets and valuables that could be used for the moment of their matrimony.

No one was spared from the tradition.

A cherry wood chest filled with small treasures was the proof of that tradition. It was filled with small precious things—of heirlooms of women from the Senju line: a delicately embroidered gown, a chain of small jewels, tortoise rings with gold engravings for her small fingers.

However, when she turned twelve years old and she took charge of purchasing her own presents, her collection deviated from the usual bridal treasures: the chest was soon filled with stained leather-bound books, crafted instruments for tumor extractions. But there were still long chains of gold strings, with ornaments kept for dainty hands, given by her king—a sign of calling for her to serve their kingdom, no matter who she would marry.

For some reason, Sakura had the urge to burn the dresses and tear the chains.

Instead, she slept on the floor holding onto the blue wedding silk.

vi. the just Simeon's | Certain word



It was rather surprising when her cousin dropped by for another visit. It was rather delightful for him to when she felt like her head was going to be axed from its shoulders. A great commotion commenced from her scandalized servants when Naruto, as eccentric as he was, decided to call on her during an early evening. The prince was laughing and breathing heavily, sky eyes glinting with happiness. A faint freesia scent surrounded him, and Sakura knew that it came from the private gardens in the Hyuuga household.

“Can it wait till morning?” she grumbled irritably as she shooed away her maidservants, steering him towards her receiving room.

“Now where is the fun in that? If I need to talk to you inside my own house, then I can do so whenever I want.”

“Have you ever heard of propriety?” Her scowl was warning enough, but he did not retreat since it was already a sign of her good mood. It was helpful to know of the rumor that a pink-haired, hot-tempered noblewoman was more terrifying when disturbed from slumber. Thus, he made sure to visit her before retiring for the night, so as not to face her wrath at an early dawn.

“Maybe,” he replied as easily, a bold grin on his face. “But I will be leaving again in the early morn, and I just want to say something.”

“Go on.” She laughed, good humor intact, expecting another of those ridiculous gossip mongering or his antics with his soon-to-be wife from the East. He sat on the cushioned oak chair with his still amicable smile, so Sakura did not know where their conversation would go. “Is it true?”

“About?” she prompted, settling the tray of tea and crumpets on the table.

“You are engaged to Sasuke.”

Her hand paused in reaching for the teacup. She stilled and gazed intensely at the faultless golden rimming of the red linen. She took a deep breath and sharply exhaled out.

“Nobody knows that.” Her words were accusing. “Who told you?”

“If you are being forced to marry him,” her blond cousin shrugged off her query and mussed his spiky tresses with a hand in anxiety, “I can hide you in my house and let the thing pass. He deserves a kick to his gut. I can make sure that he leaves you alone.”

She finally shook her head, putting the fine porcelain cup in front of him. “I already accepted it, Naruto.”

“What? But you just finished your apprenticeship under old granny—”

Her fingers trembled for a second. “I already accepted.”

His face crumpled at her response. “Sakura.”

“My father is alive because of him.” The dry lips were bit by a pair of nervous



teeth. "Think of it as payment."

There was a hush that seemed to stretch on for a whole candle mark, but it was merely a few trickles of wax that passed before he raised the cup and tasted the bitter drink.

"So, if you are not that argumentative on the matter..." Naruto continued lightly, his hands wrapping around the fragile cup and his eyes following her almost stiff movements as she took the porcelain pot.

"You fell in love with him?" Sakura could not blame the incredulous tone he had.

The spout nearly missed the edge of her cup. "I-I have just known him for a few days!"

"Sasuke," he dismissed the sudden stutter in her words and the fluster in her face as she tried to pour the dark colored beverage without rattling the china, "is a powerful man. Even more at the present, where he has regained his rightful inheritance. And as I will be the future king, I think that an ally like him will indeed be beneficial."

She could not even look at him, not knowing what her response should be.

"But as your cousin... No, as a friend." His boyish tilt was lowering. "I think that he is not worth ruining your life for."

There was a spark of temper as her fingers twitched on her lap, but she remained silent.

"How can you presume that?"

"Because, Sakura, you don't even know him," he whispered with a grimace. Gone were his cajoling smile and joking gaze, replaced by a serious façade and a clenching hand over his right knee. "You might be involved in the wars, but you have never been involved in the battlefield."

Sakura could not argue with his words, for Naruto was right. Always right, in fact. No matter how many people had perceived the boisterous, lighthearted prince as a dimwitted political figure, he was still cunning enough to trick the older fools who wanted him out of the line.

"Alright." She grasped her sweating palms together and sat primly on the chair with an attentive glide of her head towards him. It never hurt to hear whatever Naruto had to say, as he would always be her concerned dear friend. "I'm listening."

"Sasuke..." Naruto then began to feel as awkward and uneasy as her, obviously uncomfortable on being put on such a spot. "I think there is something wrong with Sasuke."

"Your point is?"

"Yes, yes. But this is going to sound...odd." Never did Naruto fiddle with his



thumbs, but he was nervously rubbing the large pads of those two fingers together. “Have you ever seen Sasuke actually eat?”

“I am not following you.”

“He...” He inhaled another mouthful of air before he stammered with a rush, “...drinks blood.”

“Pardon me?” Nearly sputtering the liquid out of her mouth, Sakura gaped from the uncomfortable face that Naruto was making. When he did not explain further, a small stifled giggle escaped from her throat.

This somehow strengthened his resolve. He fully glared at her and fisted his hands.

“It is not funny.”

“Of course not, it is hilarious!” she managed to reply in spite of the suppressed chortles. “Most outrageous nonsense I have ever heard.”

He stood up from the padded seat, as if his composure nearly seeped out from him.

Then, as her laughter turned into peals that filled the emptiness, a defeated smile crept up to his face. “I guess I was being ridiculous.”

“Silly,” Sakura reiterated as her mirth subsided to a hiccupping fit. “But he does look like a walking corpse, like those undead tales that travelers like to tell stories about.”

There were the remnants of a pondering look on his face before it melted into complacency.

“Good night, Lady Haruno.”

vii. May I not be separated from you

Everyone in the household expected an abundant amount of heavy rains. And it was confirmed as the tendrils of dark grey cumulus unfurled, drifting lazily in front of the faded sun. Seeing them across the morning horizon dampened the happy state she was in. Fortunately, her mind was pleasantly blank, her fingers drumming idly at the window ledge.

It was already her last day inside the palace; she needed to pack immediately. But even moving a single article of clothing remained daunting, and she remained instead, staring at the remaining detritus of dog-eared books and worn-out boots scattered across her carpeted floor.

It had already been a month since the news of her acceptance of a certain Southerner’s proposal made ripples in the court. She had received praises from distant



acquaintances, accepted well-wishes from unknown relatives, and a few scornful remarks from the circle of court ladies.

She had no heart to depart now, knowing what she would face upon arriving at her homely abode. The paternal rage that exuded from there was almost palpable beneath her fingers. Her father might not acknowledge her false motives in marrying the reclusive young man, but she was more fearful that he might scoff at her new, untested emotions.

Not wanting to remain inside her stifling room, she gathered the strength to rise from the patio and walked towards the door. As soon as Sakura turned the knob, the tip of her small nose almost collided against a hard shoulder.

“Good morning.” She breathed the scent of melted ice and faded clean soap.

It was time.

He did not return her greeting, but still she followed him.

The black mare was heavily armed, probably trained for war campaigns. A bridled saddle encumbered its back, as Sakura brought a small package on her hands, wearing a light white riding gown, only trimmed with the light olive shades of lace on the collar and gauzy brilliant silk on her sleeves.

“We will take a path behind the rivers. Follow the road.”

She seemed surprised when he draped a heavy cloak on her shoulders. With a closer inspection under the hood, she realized that it was made up of rare cloth. Much thicker than mink or any animal fur, but it was warmer and comfortable than any wrap she had ever worn.

“Then deviate from it and make our way to *Carpantas*.”

She did not know if he had taken her with the permission of her relatives, all she knew was that he had come to her door and asked if she was free for a long ride. Without any hesitation, she had agreed to accompany him.

They both overlooked the glassy expanse of the river. She was dressed in a plain shade of celadon, with her hair unbound as the wind distressed it through the journey.

It was slightly bemusing that he had not even asked her to pack anything, only providing her a thick leather coat, as well as carrying a few packages of food on the horse’s back. She did not have any inkling of where they were going, but she had her blind trust placed on him, knowing that her safety was preeminent on his side.

It was on the third day that she finally asked him. Her hair, woven to a thick braid, seemed to bristle even with the slight caress of a breeze. The winds were getting stronger and colder as they trudged on, her green tunic and thick brown breeches becoming increasingly inadequate. “Does my father know I’m with you?”

“His Highness is informed,” he only said, but he did not confirm if anyone knew



that she was with him.

“I asked if my father knows.”

“He will.”

“But then, if you have taken me—”

“You came to me willingly,” he replied, which made the matter that she was abducted erased.

“Leave me here.” Her protest was futile, she knew. But it would not deter her to voice it out. “I do not care if I have to go back by foot.”

The horse came to a stop.

He came down, disentangling himself from the stirrups and grinding the rocky ground with his hard boots.

“What are you doing?” Sakura tried not to squirm when his large hands held the sides of her waist. A heated brush of crimson painted a trail across her face.

“Come.”

The fingers steadily gripped her hips, molding them easily on her body as if it was normal for him to carry flustered women down from their horses. Aside from hurting her pride with his act of chivalry, there was another reason why she did not want him touching her anywhere.

“I’m heavy.”

It added the insides of her head whenever he was *that* close. Could she have picked a better reason?

“We’ll see.”

There was that familiar curve on his face—a smirk that quickly hackled her ire to the fore.

“I can go down on my own, Lord Uchiha.”

Instead of stepping back, he only lifted her off the steed.

And because she needed to find her anchor, her hands rested on his shoulders in panic.

When Sakura was finally sure that her feet were on solid earth, she refused to look up. She did not want to see the smug expression on his face, as she felt his chin nearly brushing the crown of her head.

Realizing that she was still holding onto him tightly, the young duchess rapidly retracted her hands, and failed to mask her pleased countenance to what she saw behind him.



He raised his eyebrow as her eyes roved over the scenery before her: gushing streams, creeping vines, dew-stained leaves, fluttering willows, and a dream-like chateau of what probably stood there for centuries.

“... You live in the mountain pass.” The aging castle was perched on the edge of a sharp canyon, with a river gushing forth underneath the larger earth. A valley flourished behind the picturesque view. It was nothing like the place that her people believed of *Havaselve*, the legends speaking of endless frosts and icicles. There was even a basilica that stood erect at the mouth of the river bed, at the end of the tall staircase.

“I did,” he said under the canopy of fire trees that scattered along the road towards the gleaming fortress. There was a certainty that he was pleased with her reaction as they continued to tread on.

“It was not your home before?”

“My mother’s summer house,” he curtly answered after a few seconds.

“Then where did you...?” She placed a quick stopper on her thoughtless mouth before the question was finished, in fear of the slowly building tension.

They suddenly came to a stop, in front of a cove curtained by blossoming vines of white bougainvilleas as they nearly approached the ridge.

“Marry me here.” The statement was clear-cut, straight and she could not help but wonder how on earth he could be so composed while uttering those words.

“It is beautiful here, but it would not be right—”

Sakura could not continue her unimportant burble as she saw what the lord before her was doing. Fingers, fair yet roughly burnt, slowly took off the sole adornment on his right hand. He flexed his left hand and on the middle of its palm was the seemingly harmless object, being offered to her.

“Wear it.”

But the lady could only stare at it, a marring blot to the white expanse of his hand. The signet ring was probably as ancient as the grounds they were standing on. Symbols of ravens and half-moons were carved on banded colors of red and onyx; enormous untold stories lay behind that little thing.

And now, as that priceless heirloom was laid out for her to take, the gravity of his actions heightened her apprehension. All they needed was for the heaven to witness them, this ring to replace the carnelian gems that represented her own line, and a simple verbum, like the matrimony of the old, would be enough for her to be tied to him.

She raised her hesitant eyes to meet those irises, light refracting shades that were comparable to small, circular oceans at twilight before a tempest—deeply gray and deceitfully calm, where lesser men became complacent as they were lulled to security and met their watery grave.



But the man in front of her dropped his gaze, and he slowly took her hand that was hovering between them.

And when ash-black eyes met again with her tremulous meadow-green, there was a query in that gaze. It might be asking for approval or inquiring about her sanity, but she paid no heed to it; Sakura drew a nervous breath and closed her eyes.

His touch fluttered across the sensitive skin at the back of her hand. She felt a tinge of guilt because she was wearing his coat, knowing that the weather was more bitter than the welcoming weather of her home. She was cold, yes, but it seemed unlikely that such skin could be this freezing.

These links of thought were gone the moment she reached her other hand over his.

And as she inhaled deeply, the cold stone slipped to her finger, a seal to their covenant. She delicately traced the engravings and edges of its tiny blue-black wings, almost alive in their statuesque mid-flight. A reddish line was on the base of the emblem, written in ancient words, *Awaken, lands beyond the snowy valleys*, ending with the carved white edelweiss.

As if he had heard the skittering nervous thoughts, his gentle hold on her cheek raised her face towards him. His hand threading through the revealed locks of rose, as a soft fluttering touch of ice—his lips—grazed on her forehead. He left a warming trail as his breath thawed and drifted over her closed lids, the tip of her temple, and on the bridge of her nose.

Lukewarm fingers traced her mouth, slightly chapped but still smooth, as she had continuously wetted and bitten it for the past hour. His creased palm held her at the base of her head, the sensuous exhalation on her face deliberate, and then he laid his genteel, chaste kiss on her waiting lips.

Sakura could tell that her world did stop. It was theirs, isolated and centered on the both of them. There was a bold hope that beat loudly on her chest, making her believe that maybe, maybe this choice was not a mistake.

When he came closer, she learned how corrupting desire could be.

She—weak yet willful, unyielding and unsure—wanted to be with him.

This was her only thought as they took and coveted at that moment.

Both were gradually being submerged in wintry breeze and heated touch, liquid flame and jolting ice drowning her mind rather than minding their nakedness. In the defining silence and on the shades of this clandestine place, they were joined

(he kneels before her, while she stands on the fertile earth, affixed to the soil with a sturdy arm on her waist. she hears crawling murmurs, oaths that he sings in a low tenor, on the smooth expanse of her belly,

be faithful, either in illness or in health...



*she laces her fingers through his black strands while glazed green eyes opens,
she answers,*

i do.

*and she curls her spine towards him—he is an obsidian butterfly alighting on a
sole petal of pink on the verdant earth—her moist mouth dapples his dark head,
repeating vows that she remembers clearly, intimate and binding,*

until death do us depart

*sight and scent and sensation engulf the sun and the stars and the sky as feverish
bodies press close; it is the first time she ever feels that he is warm, he is human.*

*and he latches his hand on her elbow, pulls her gradually, tenderly to him as he
replies,*

i do.)

viii. My heart's inner ache | Never abates

Bearing the symbol of the Uchiha house—the ruling family of *Havaselve*—was heavy on her third finger.

After reading the ecstatic letter from her cousin on her marriage, she received an amusing message from a hot-tempered Duke who nearly risked a damaging confrontation where he threatened to storm their abode, take her back, and cut her husband with a blunt blade. But it was rather impossible when the King himself had already given his word, his only precious granddaughter, to his strongest ally.

Living in the red walls of the *Cetatea* was normal—whatever was normal when you were their respected queen.

With no guidance, she did her best in keeping the stately manor as homely as possible. She had two female assistants, who often reminded her that as their lady, she was not entitled to even lift her finger. She only responded that her restless state could not take inactivity for such a long time.

For almost a month, she had not seen what was beyond the brick and mortar walls of the castle. Sasuke often left early and rarely returned home before dusk. They did not share any dinners or lunches after the first week, and the oak racks in their room were always devoid of its sable. But it was her great pleasure to at least spend a few moments before dawn, as limbs rested and looped on her when her exhausted body was too captivated with the seductions of sleep.

But today, Sakura made sure that she would wake before he leaves.

The silver beams disappeared behind the curtains of dark clouds, providing the



only illumination inside the shadowy room. A faint smoky scent floated in from outside, perhaps from the incense that was asked to be burned earlier, almost making her drowsy. As she remained there, bones cold and heart even colder, she waited for her husband to stop staring outside and turn towards her.

Lucid moon light peeked between the window panes.

He spared her one dark eye, staring at her in response.

"Are you awake, Sasuke?"

Soft rustling of their thick embroidered coverlet answered her silent question, his warmth departing from her curious touch. It was always like this before the sun even rose from the summit of those snowy peaks.

Her adjusting eyesight only caught the lines of his taut back cast by the fragile candle light.

A breath escaped from her lips, a sweet sigh. Rising as her cascading locks followed the path of her bare back, she raised her eyes as he suavely walked to the other side of their room.

"Can I go with you today?"

There was that small second when his hand hesitated as he was about to pick the folded clothes on the bedside.

"Go back to sleep," he spoke them deliberately, as if trying to gauge her reaction.

The thought of those crinkled epistles hidden beneath a tin box made her deeply miss her family. "I need to send them. Father will probably be—"

"Sakura."

Whenever he spoke of her name in that dark, hypnotizing smoothness, everything would stop to hear that deep intonation; how the soft authority curled over the syllables, her flushing in response.

As she shifted to sit and lean her head against the ornately carved oak posts, he was almost finished in buttoning his dark leather vest.

"I am merely accompanying you." Her teeth gritted in obvious disdain, a woman of no rank nor name, only to be known as the wife and consort of this enigmatic King of the Cold South. "There shall be no need to imprison me."

She already knew his ostensible reply.

"Do not go outside."

"And why not?"

In his typical reaction, he turned slowly on his naked heel, exposing the play of



shadows on his stoic façade to her.

"I am not a child, Sasuke." It was a grating thing to point this out to a man who was supposed to be intelligent.

His low impassive murmur was resonant, still clear as if he had spoken them aloud, "You have no place in conflict."

"And I know that I have no stature among men," her soft alto repeated the same intonation of his cautionary words. "I am merely going to the nearby village and am very much capable of protecting myself."

"Stay." And he strode away, Sakura missing the wavering tremble on his voice as he walked away.

Sakura felt the cold bite of her ring on her mouth as she covered it and tried not to cry.

ix. From my eyes tears are flooding

Risking crossing his ire and receiving an annoyed stare, the pink-haired woman went unannounced to his work den when he returned.

He sat on the comfortable velvet seat, sipping on his goblet of wine that he religiously took every night. They told her that it invigorated him, and she did not question it, as he was still sober and men were rarely intoxicated at such a small amount in their flagons.

When she entered, he raised a brow and contorted his face into a displeased grimace.

Sakura never meant to keep this from him: the sudden bouts of nausea and her loss of appetite, the sudden fatigue, the shocked expressions of her confidants in the castle...

"Sasuke?"

He was entitled to know that he was the father of her child.

So she would tell him.

He slowly settled the silver goblet on his desk, unhooked his fingers around its wide stalk, and stood up to walk towards her.

"I planned to tell you earlier, but I wasn't sure if it was...t-true." She did not want to stutter, but the prowling look made her nervous.

And no matter how vexed she was in trying to understand this man, she would always meet him halfway. That was the reason she nestled her head on the skin exposed



by the low, sharp triangle neckline of his linen shirt and let her nose trace the lines of his collarbone.

“My brother envisioned a peace where we could coexist with the Pagans,” he started tentatively, for the first time, unsure and awkward as he brought his hand over the curve of her belly. “We went to negotiate with them, but what we received in return was Itachi being stripped off his clothes, impaled by a blunt stake through his body and I was taken, tortured until I escaped to your lands.” Breathing deeply, his fingers fluttered across the growing flesh in her torso. Sakura could not stop the edge of her eyes from being filled with liquid compassion, yet she tried not to break this rare moment.

“All I wanted was to kill them, and make them pay.” He clenched his hands for a second, trembling as he opened his fist and laid them on the base of her head, burying them on her tresses. “I could not understand why my brother had to die for that meaningless peace.

...But now, I *do*.”

When she raised her head, she saw, with that almost curve of his mouth, that he was...*happy*.

The emotion seeped to her and she knew from then on, without a doubt, that as long as she was his wife, Sakura would do anything for this man who never smiled.

“I will create a world for our child. A world where my brother would have been proud of.”

Her lips gently brushed his, and as he shuddered, exhaled, he returned the gesture with more vigor. Her receiving mouth tasted the intoxicating tang that only an old, rich wine could provide, but the heady *coppery aftertaste* disturbed her before she forgot it in the clusters of sensation.

x. Your beauty turns to ugliness

Sakura was dimly hidden beneath the warm shades of the aging pergolas. As the soft sun rays dappled in between the gaps of the soft wooden planks, she rested a single ring-encrusted hand over the willow bark of the vine-ensnared pillar and glared at the stone tiers with renewed disdain.

It seemed reasonable for a couple of days, when Sakura thought that relaying to her husband her current predicament would help loosen the noose over her seclusion inside the brimstone walls. But she was sadly mistaken, as Sasuke became more adamant to keep her inside. He would not even let her do her duties of keeping the manor in order! So what was she supposed to do, fatten herself up like a turkey and waddle?

She could no longer stand this.



"Milady—"

The blonde stopped in mid-sentence as Ino recognized that green glare.

In a flurry of dark organza and forest-hued silk, the pink-haired aristocrat stalked away from her place in impatience. Leaf blades crackled under the force of her boots and she did not glance back at the young maid who was trying to catch up with her.

"Sakura." When alone, Ino called her by her name—often said in such a frustrated manner, because the maiden treated her like a confused and wayward little sister. Blame it on the continuous repressed energy that she corked up inside her.

"Whatever you have in mind, I am sure it is not going to work."

"We are going out."

Sakura gathered her skirts and took advantage of the cover that the pergolas gave her.

"The guards will notice if you—"

"I am sure that you have some spare clothes that you can lend me."

"Still, we cannot run away from here!"

There was a resolve in her eyes as she mischievously grinned.

"I think we can manage to escape with a couple of horses."

The old piazza on the borders was filled with cemented roads and winding staircases connected to different elevated houses. Soft drizzles melted the conical icicles that adhered to the edges of the gutter roofs, covering the village in a wet slush. A swarm of people from all walks of life: merchants trading with the late buyers, blacksmiths letting their iron smelts hiss, farmers carefully inspecting the newly made yokes, women selling their embroidered tapestries.

It felt amazing to be outside and for once, the stray sunlight that failed to touch her pale skin warmed the remaining chill. Granted that this was the farthest she could get away from that accursed place for a two-day ride, the lower province was brimming with life that she found similar to her old lands.

Her handmaiden was generous enough to lend her this simple dress with a hood attached to the rectangular collar on her nape to hide her pleated, conspicuous hair from any attention.

Bless her, that considerate maidservant. Ino had been adamantly against the mere idea and much more to accompanying her in this rare occasion today. It was a great comfort that Ino still managed a smile or giggle when they were haggling prices from a crooked-looking vendor. The white woolen lace would be perfect for the nursery as well as the little baubles of toys, like a little wooden ball and a beautifully sculpted toy



carriage that she purchased in a reasonable price.

They managed to enjoy themselves after all.

As she placed her hand against her face to estimate the hour, she finally realized something.

“No.” Her breath hitched in anxiety. “It is gone.”

“Gone?”

An unmistakable panic choked up her throat. “I lost it.” The watery silvers threatened to fill the brim of her eyes.

“What is it?”

“I hope I just dropped it, but—”

“The ring?” Turquoise blue settled on the lacking ornament on Sakura’s small, pale hand. An unusual calm smoothed immediately on the handmaiden, her smile a tad too gentle. “It has an emblem, right?”

“Ino, it’s encrusted in a precious stone,” she whispered in trepidation. Losing the ring would only complicate matters since it could be used for a hefty ransom and could buy even a whole mountain with only the press of the ring on melted beeswax.

Besides, she was slightly terrified of what his response would be. Though he had never raised his hand on her, she could recognize the tell tale signs of his terrible temper.

“It might already been stolen.”

“Let’s trace back our trail today.”

Patting her head consolingly, she then took her hand.

“But Ino—”

“Here in Greater City, when you leave a bag of gold in the middle of the road, no one will pick it up.” Her footsteps were strangely loud in her ears despite the bustle of people. “Not even a petty thief or a hungry peasant will dare.”

“Really?”

“They say this country is paradise. A utopia where no sinners exist.” There was a bitter smile when she said this, light eyes narrowing in some unknown passage of contemplation. “I assure you, no one will touch that ring.”

“Why are you so sure—?”

“His Majesty promised it to everyone,” she curtly answered. “He will make a perfect world.”

She followed the weathered streets until they finally reached the circular plaza



after a few minutes. There were a few villagers strolling around the white well, stiffly walking and eyes even cautiously looking at their surroundings. Now that Sakura was beginning to see these little things, she pondered why the people were unreasonably guarded, as if their every move was seen by ever-present eyes. There were men cloaked darker than their coats but still—

A dull glint captured her attention, distracting her from the strange words Ino told her.

Mumbling excuses and a hasty sorry, she grasped the ring and slid it quickly. It was wedged between the cracks in the pavement near the sweets shop that they looked at earlier.

“Ino, you were right!” The pink-haired woman was overwhelmed with relief. “I found it.”

When Sakura turned around, the blonde was already talking to a cloaked young man. He was all starch white skin and ink black lines, and Ino conversed with him furiously in the same language of *munteneste*, but it was said in an accent she could hardly understand. Green irises observed Ino as she argued with the man who was smiling chillingly. The man replied in that low dialect as well, distinctive from the parts of the alpine regions.

That was when the young man approached her, peered a while in her cloak before nodding his head.

“I see.”

“Sai!” Ino tapped his shoulder, adamant. “No one should know!”

“They were suspicious of her for a while,” he responded quietly, a smile still in place. “It was your presence and the insignia on her cloak that eased their tracking.”

“It was a good thing that this was your post.” There was a dark, amused snicker. “Or else my head will be—”

“You must take her back now,” he said in a whisper, a warning in his tone. “It is three in the afternoon.”

“Of course.” The sharp gasp and the panic that shook Ino distressed Sakura. But when her hand coiled around hers in a secured hold, she glared pointedly. “You will not breathe a word of this?”

“I’ll cover you.”

“What was that about?” Why were they running away from the surge of the slowly thickening mob? Ino’s hand was sweaty, her grip hard and cold. There was fear in her that she tried but failed to hide as she kept on looking forward. “Ino?”

Suddenly, the villagers began to swarm in front of the spacious yard. They congregated in front of the town’s main water supply, the grand well that was being



drawn with a sturdy wooden pail. And because of her curiosity, she pried carefully on the muted exchange.

"...a man was caught stealing bread. Fingers will be cut off, perhaps."

"And he'll be surely flagged—"

"Bloody tyrant—"

"Hold your tongue! Do you want it to be cut?"

"—drinks it from his enemies, drains from their necks, warm and fresh!"

When she arrived at the end of the western entrance of the village, the young queen realized that she was already alone, as she was too engrossed with those mystifying words.

She was lost.

Taking deep calming breaths, Sakura ruminated her situation. She was not familiar with the landscape, but surely she knew her way to the stables where her standard bred was kept. Should she stay stationary in her place and wait for Ino? Or should she go to the stables and wait for her there?

Deciding that the latter was best, she started to find her path back when someone pulled her.

"We have been searching for you, Your majesty."

"Karin?"

Sure enough, the distinct ginger hair and tall form of her handmaiden was remarkably eye-capturing. She was a daughter of the wealthy boyars, and so many were fuming when she was denied of marriage and was instead demoted as a right-hand woman of the foreign queen.

Yet even when Sasuke had warned her about this affluent lady, Karin had never been malicious to her. She had been welcoming and gracious, going as far as presenting herself as her midwife for the upcoming birth of her child.

"Yes, but we must be quick. I have informed Ino to return back as well."

"Okay, but we can use the horses—"

"We are taking a short cut."

"A shortcut?"

"It has a better scenery, milady." There was foreboding in her words as they started to trek on the rocky paths that slid on behind the walled city. "You will find it interesting."



They ran inside a forest.

Tall, lean timbers were made up of animated corpses, their flesh holes that gaped at the base of their spines were filled with sickening pus. Festering maggots littered their frothing mouths; continuously moaning their pain, trying to reach the dusk above with a decaying hand. Their unseeing eyes were heaven-ward, as if begging for the visit of merciful Death, to sweep them away in that relished repose.

A red sunset that profusely shone brightly on the horizon gave their figures soft silhouettes. It was a beautiful—grotesque, but *beautiful*—landscape of a hellish copse: twisted arms like willow branches, bent fingers and toes as its leaves, scattered ears and nails as their wilted remains, with the murder of ravens as their cawing piece of requiem, perched and pecked on their mottling barks.

Sakura could not even breathe, transfixed and she could not bring herself to step in further on the grove of the dead .

"Her highness—" The magenta hems of her dress brushed the stained greens, the blemishes darker than the brighter fabric. "—should have stayed in the gardens."

"Ka-Karin." She managed to unclog the strangling air out of her winded lungs. "He-Heavens, pitiful spirits, who did this?"

"You should not be so emboldened to defy your husband," she whispered as her hand reached to touch her horrified façade. "His sense of justice is extremely upheld here. This is the price we have to pay."

"But there are—"

There were whimpers, harsh breathings and blinking lids. Some of them were still alive! She ripped her eyes away from the disturbing sight and shook her shoulders lividly.

"—why didn't you tell me? Why? He didn't tell me!"

"This is the reprisal for his actions." The twin pale brown hardened. "Will you leave him now, Lady Uchiha? Will you bear his son, yes, it is a son." She smiled wickedly, transforming her features akin to a scorned witch. "Now you know that he is—"

A horrified gasp disturbed her angry tirade, before Karin scrambled to her knees and curtsied, head almost reaching the tips of her knee. She dared not to meet even his feet.

Against the bleeding backdrop of a fading afternoon, Sasuke stood behind them in content. His bleak outline prominent in the sea of executioners in black hoods and concealed eyes. They carried a slumped form of a young boy with his hands raggedly cut off, dragging him on the ground by his armpits.

Then, he strode carefully to them, taking off his scaled glove and held it on its edges.



“Sasuke?”

“Wife of Hozuki,” he addressed.

He did not reveal any livid reaction; thus, emboldening Karin to raise her chin a few notches to meet the sight of his hands.

“Your Majesty—”

The hard smack of his leather glove struck her red cheek, prompting the edge of her lips to bleed from the rapid impact.

“You led her here.”

“Yes.”

“You know your punishment.”

Her whimper was soft, almost choked, “Yes.”

“Suigetsu. This is your responsibility.”

Sakura remembered Lord Hozuki, one of the faithful knights under his command. She saw him in her old home in the past (*that felt like a good dream, right?*). She did not really know him, aside from Karin’s complaints and that one time when she healed him in the cathedral halls, where he boisterously told her about his betrothed. She could still remember the excited gush when they married before the calm snowfall.

Grabbing the arm of the retreating man, she angrily called to this...this demon.

“What are you doing? Why are you allowing this to happen? Sasuke, what are you—”

He squarely met her eyes, pinned them to his, not allowing them to move away from him.

“Kill your wife. And after that, the thief.”

Bloodcurdling shrieks, the sound of a thudding wood, the endless howl of curses and Sakura could not look away from his eyes. She could not speak as her tears began and corked her ability to even comprehend why.

And Sasuke offered his hand.

(*i am just giving you an option.*)

“Shall we go, Sakura?”

And Sakura closed her eyes and accepted it.

xi. Your blood falls like water!



Sakura stood in the centre of her dressing chamber, something that was a requirement for a woman of her stature. She once protested because of the inconvenience of such a room, but as Karin had once told her, she was to have the best service as their queen. Ino affirmed this and installed a full-length mirror, made of the best polished silver, its coldness even radiating from a distance.

But now, those kind words of encouragement and comfort instilled doubt in the place that she was starting to accept as her home. Were they sympathetic to her plight or just dreaded her husband?

Almighty heavens, she could not even go inside their bedchambers, as she could not close her eyes in horror of hearing the accusations and assaults of her conscience and logic.

Could she forgive someone like him?

(evilincarnatehellisuponyouyouyouyou she can hear the shrieks of a once respectable maiden, before the blunt piercing of the stake is—)

“Sakura,” the unmistakable snarl on her unbound hair contrasted the pliant hold of his hand over her neck.

The small whispers stopped.

“Sasuke!” Her heart nearly (*splatters against?*) jumped out of her ribs, backing her against the gleaming metal. He attached a strong grip on her, barring any chances of escape.

“Do they despise me?”

He stepped back, and so with his touch gone, so was the silence.

Despise him? The distorted and ugly screams asked in unison. It fed hungrily on her growing fear. *Can you? Can you? Can you?*

“Yes, they do. They fear me and yet they know they are protected. They cannot despise me.”

“Can they hate me? Yes,” he spoke calmly. A feather-like touch, ghosting over the edges of her trembling mandible, made his words inescapable. Blocking the hypnosis that was rendering her incoherent, his hold tightened, impeding her quickening exhales.

“But,” a deep, quiet laughter made her self-preservation instincts go haywire, as he repeated the tortured cries in a condemning voice, “can you, Sakura?”

He abandoned her for a heartbeat—

(you are mad, mad, mad, mad they scream, they warn you, another yell from a child you are insane to stay beside him)

Her knees nearly buckled, making her impossibly weak. But there were his arms ensnaring her waist to prevent her from sliding beneath his grasp as he stood in one fluid



motion, carrying her to him, pressing her to the nearest solid surface.

The breath of pinewood incense and melted snow drifted to her shoulder, cooling down the dark branding of bruises on its curves. His erudite hands, luminescent against the darkness, could not be seen through faint traces of her reflection. But she could see the spindle-like fingers sink into her as she was dragged to him, writhing uncontrollably and turned to face the mirror.

She lifted the heavy lids, meeting the reflection of the silver mirror before them.

And she did not see anything else but herself.

Her astonished gasp was almost out of her mouth when his lips, as if in silent apology, reverently touched the pale column of her throat. The gentle caress emboldened his brackish stare, flickering crimson under the play of the scarce candlelight. Yet no matter how vindictive that glare was, his suffocating hold over her waist loosened.

Her cloak unravel at the bottom of her feet as she watched how his hands—was her mind playing tricks, or did she saw them blood-stained?—tore the side-laces of her stiff kirtle away.

And when he *impaled* her, drove her to wretched culmination, instead of the burst of dappled colors, she saw the scattered corpses, pitiful faces but always, always and inexorably, entangled and superimposed upon the grisly nightmare was him, him, *him*.

As she rested on the blemished cream silk of her dress, she found it painful—as he held her gently, brushing the tears on her stinging cheeks—that she could do nothing but surrender to this gratifying demise.

xii. Have mercy on my son | No mercy for me

Old cathedral bells sang their hollowed rhythms, mirroring the beats of her pounding chest.

She laboriously panted for air, despite how they had scorched her throat. Painful as it was to move further, the woman nevertheless struggled to close the distance between her and the ancient, looming structure.

Finally taking the last two stairs of the fifteen hundred steps in a harsh stride, she grasped the brass bar, stinging cold on her touch. As if in response, the large mahogany door creaked away from its twin, letting the welcoming glow break inside the dreary place.

Wildly, her skirts whipped behind her heels as she ran towards the center of the empty tabernacle room. Flaming wickers enlightened her fair complexion, revealing two innocent faces. Perspiration lined her temples, as she continued to utter nothings, of



driving the ubiquitous demons away from taking this little one from her.

The queen stood before the lifelike monument of a serene mother looking down upon her benevolent son with a gaze of utter adoration. It made her wonder if this little tableau was here to spite her and the quiet, unmoving child on her arms. Her shivering form suddenly straightened in a steely resolve.

A concerned, coherent sentence drowned out their voices.

“Please, milady. We cannot do anything!” Sakura knew that voice. Sakura recognized her, but the protests remained unheard. “We need to go! There are people who are still joining the upheaval, you need to escape, His majesty shall—”

Hollow words reverberated as she fervently cried out.

In nomine Patris,

Her trembling middle and index finger moved towards her damp forehead.

et Filii,

They then descended towards the top of her bosom cradling a thin scapular.

et Spiritu

The digits darted to the left of her, then quickly tracing the air towards the right tips of her shoulder,

Sancti

The chorus of souls living six feet under her feet chanted.

Amen.

She knelt down the pew in abject silence. In torment, she could not feel the hands that grasped her forearms, trying to snap her awake. They were frantic calls of her name, not her title. They were all pleading her to stop, to abandon all attempts to rescue him from the claws of death.

credo in unum deum, factórem cæli et terræ—

The spectators were increasing, her audience of bloodshot eyes intensely looking at her and her dear, silent son to take him away from their little family as the retribution for his twisted sense of judgment.

visibílium ómnium et invisibílium—

Her fiercely mutterings of prayers were barely audible as she continued the melodious chant. Devotion brought her here, on her unsteady limbs and clenched fingers, prostrated humiliatingly to ask for a miracle.

deum de deo, lumen de lúmine, deum verum de deo vero—

“Sakura!” The shout dimmed the din of voices. “Back at the stronghold...there,



we can heal him. We will save your son, so please...please.”

“Ino?” Sakura could not breathe. She could not be—“Ino?”

“Yes, milady?”

“My child is not dead.” Not hearing the protests from the anxious servant, she used her rare commandeering presence for her vassals to follow her, “The river will cure him.”

“But, Sakura!”

“Yamanaka, come with me.”

Frenzied eyes were alight with inexplicable joy, an untouchable faith beyond reason.

Sakura called it hope but Ino, along with everyone else, called it madness.

The noble lady purposefully walked out of the chamber, running towards the tiled paths, towards the rocky terra firma where it ended in a jagged pointed precipice. Outside, there was already the loud blast of war trumpets and howls of battle, yet she had the fire of a determined mother.

"Sakura!"

And there, the prince of her tales came, with the razor metal on his hand and was barely injured. But he was following her, ignoring the pinpricks of torch light that littered the flat grounds, swiftly climbing up in the stairs.

"No! Don't!"

Butcher!

"Sakura!" he roared, rage evident as he pulled her arm to him. "You foolish woman, I told you to—"

Slaughterer!

It all happened slowly, when all the screams turned into gibberish noise and they escalated into a deafening clap. Sakura recognized the pale face behind him, lit with a grim smile.

How could you defend such a devil?

And for that single moment, her sanity returned.

When Sakura gazed at him for the last time, she saw copious red marking path of tears on his draining face. There was a sharp spear that almost conjoined them to their chest, her open heart to his closed one.

His eyes—gray and ashen—seemed to weep red.

Sakura did not realize that he was looking at her, not at the limp newborn that



she raised to his face. He was looking at the spear that was lodged in her chest. When she smiled with tears, she whispered, “Our son... live.”

“Forgive me, Your highness.”

They stood cornered on the precipice.

Crumpling into his arms, he did not feel the blade that pierced his back, or the hundreds of gazes that were satisfied at their macabre image. With a last brush of the wet clump of dark hair on the tiny head, he took the stained child from the slowly cooling arms, and heaved it to the waiting blonde woman with her quaking hands.

(the voices are gone. they forgive you. he will live, and he will be like you. a son, a son.—*sakura skips to the edge of the precipice. like a guiltless child, she points to a familiar point where a cove holds witness to a certain pledge sasuke, i am happy enough she calls him, her arms open wide to fly.*)

He leaned his clammy temple on her bruised neck, on the shorn strands of pink that dusted the sides of his cheek. All he possessed were the vestiges of a ruined home, caused by a deranged mind. A suffering she bore because she loved a monster.

(*sakura feels like there are wings—large, wide and ephemeral—on her back as they hover over the flaming night sky. a kind breeze whistles on their ears. broken green glass-eyes are open, her fingers caress his closed lids as they break the soft mirror, cold and silver, in yielding shards. they sink to the watery depths, the tart taste of freshwaters on her mouth. and she feels free at last.*)

xiii. feel this dagger of pain | What long ago he foretold.

Ino hardly cared that in any second this scorned Uchiha realm would be gone before the deep evening breaks. She did not give a damn that the land would be razed in fire.

There might be men, women and children that fulfilled the vengeance in their minds and held the power on their hands tonight; there would still be a future promising more pain, tears and grief, but she was not bothered.

Ino could only hear the infant wailing, splitting her already breaking heart.

Landing in London



4th July 2007

Dearest Sasuke-kun,

How are you? I hope you're doing well. It seems like it's been so long since we've talked. You left so suddenly, you see. You didn't really give me much of a warning nor a time to say goodbye.

I'm trying to find the right words but all I end up doing is sounding too formal and whiny. I suppose, if you're here right now, you'll say it's typical of me.

You know, I'm not quite sure whether I'll send this or not. You'll know if I do, of course, but... this letter just lacks any purpose. I think I just want to be closer to you, even if it's simply writing your name on a piece of paper.

*I have to go to work now. Be safe.
All my love,
Sakura*

29th August 2007

Sakura,

I'm doing fine. Life in the trenches isn't as bad as it seems. I presume your work is going well too.

There's this annoying boy, Uzumaki Naruto, in my troop. He's loud and obnoxious and insists that I'm his best friend even though I've only known the idiot for a fortnight. I think you'll like him. Our commander is about our age and is the laziest bastard you'll ever meet. His name is Nara Shikamaru and he's actually smarter than you, believe it or not. But the guy does nothing but sit on his ass the whole day. I don't know how he made it to the ranks.

I've got to go, we're having a mission briefing in five minutes.

Uchiha Sasuke.

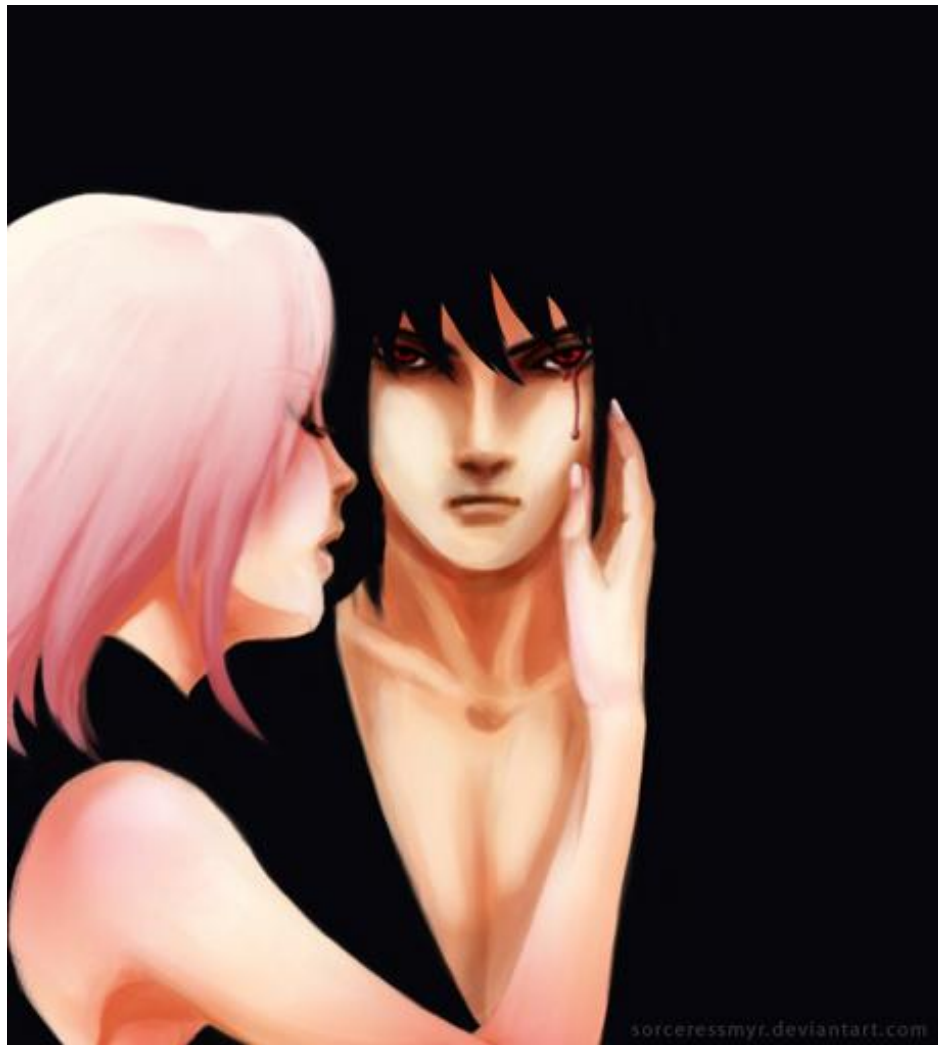
17th September 2007

Dearest Sasuke-kun,

I'm so glad to hear that you're doing well. I hope they're feeding you right over there. After all, how are you supposed to protect our country when you haven't even had a proper meal?

Tenten came today and we went out for tea. She looked really bad, poor darling. Apparently, her fiancé, Hyuuga Neji, was injured badly last week and was sent home. The doctors said that he'd survive, but the damage done to his eyes was irreversible. They said he'd go completely blind in a few days.





On the other hand, I've decided to do my part for the war effort today. I'm going to use that nursing degree of mine to help in the hospitals; for the soldiers that have been sent home. Besides, being a secretary is too boring for me anyway.

Even Ino's doing her bit. She's trying to recruit young men. I know what you're thinking right now Sasuke-kun, and it's not like that. It's just that her looks and charm make her more persuasive than others; it's a completely clean job. She's also setting aside a portion of the flowers in her family's shop for all of our men who won't come home alive.

You won't be one of them, right?



Be safe.

*All my love,
Sakura.*

22th October 2007

Sakura,

Yes, I've been eating. The food here is crap, though. We don't have anything but canned food. We had a stash of ramen, but then Naruto ate the whole goddamn carton by himself, the dumbass.

How's work at the hospital? It's good that you're there; at least you can do something rather than mope around uselessly.

I saw a man die in front of me today. He was badly injured, and Naruto wanted to treat his wounds, but Commander Nara stopped him because he was on the other side. He interrogated the man, but the guy wouldn't give us any information. In the end, we gave up.

I was ordered to kill him.

And I did.

Sakura, I don't think I can ever look at anyone in the face again.

Uchiha Sasuke.

18th November 2007

Dearest Sasuke,

Ramen, huh? We're mass-producing that stuff over here, what with the famine and everything. I'm almost sick of that stuff; I've never liked it much in the first place. But then, what's a person suppose to do? I'll trudge along until the war is over. Once we're free, I think I'm going to treat myself to a nice dress and a lavish meal. With beef. Mm. I haven't had that for a long time.

Today, the Head Doctor, Tsunade, called me after my shift and asked me if I would like to become her apprentice. I said yes immediately of course; she's the best doctor in the country! I would've been insane if I turned her down. So yes, when you come back, you won't even need to go to the hospital. I'll treat all your wounds.

I don't quite know what to say about what happened to you, Sasuke-kun. But you did what you had to do. Orders are orders, aren't they? I don't think any less of you for doing what your commander tells you to. After all, you're fighting for our country. You're just doing your job.



I must admit though: I'm scared for you. And I know you think that's annoying, but the thing is, you're never scared of anything. So someone has to be scared for you, right? I know you'll pull through though.

*Be safe and come home quickly. I'll be waiting for you.
All my love,
Sakura*

3rd December 2007

Sakura,

Tomorrow might be my last day. I can't say any specifics, in case this letter gets intercepted. If all goes as planned, I'll be back in Konoha by the New Year; and if not, then I'll probably end up losing my life. In any case, this will be my last letter.

I'm not quite sure how I feel about this.

Thank you, Sakura. Your words have gotten me through the hard times, even if they're few and far in between. They're almost as good as having the real thing with me.

I don't know what you are to me, or what I am to you. Hell, I don't know whether these are even love letters or not, all I know is that they're the only reason I can keep going right now.

~~I think I love you.~~

I don't know how long this operation will be. Ideally, it'll only take a few days, but if things get messed up, it can take weeks, months, maybe even more. But, I'll make up for this.

I'll make up for all of this, when I come back—and I will. I promise.

Just wait for me a little longer. Just trust me and that'll get me through this damnable hell.

That'll bring me home.

Marry me, Sakura.

And I swear to whatever god is out there that I'll come home alive.

Uchiha Sasuke



1st January 2008

“Excuse me, miss?”

Sakura looks up from her paperwork to find a blond-haired, blue-eyed man—(boy)—her age standing outside her office.

“Yes?” Sakura answers tiredly, hours and hours of work taking its toll on her. “Come in, come in.”

“Are you Miss Haruno Sakura?”

“Yes I am,” she answers, getting up to shake the young man’s hand. “And how may I help you, sir?”

“My name is Uzumaki Naruto.”

Something inside Sakura breaks at the sound of his name.

“Naruto?” she murmurs. Her eyes then shoot up to his face in alarm. “I—Sasuke-kun. Where’s Sasuke-kun?”

“I requested to come here to tell you the news myself—”

“S-Stop,” Sakura mutters disbelievingly. “It’s not. You—you just came here to tell me he’s injured, didn’t you? He’s just injured and he’s in one of the wards here, right? I’ll go see him now.”

She makes a move to the door, but her path is blocked by Naruto, who looks at her with too much sympathy, too much pity, for Sakura’s liking.

“He’s not there,” Naruto says.

“No!” Sakura cries. “No, I—please. *Please*,” she begs him. “He isn’t. He—he can’t be.”

“I’m sorry, miss,” Naruto says, eyes crumbling at the sight of the young pink-haired nurse slowly breaking.

“I’m going to see him now,” Sakura says determinedly. “I’ll just go down to the reception to see which room he’s in and—”

“Miss!” Naruto says, grasping her shoulders with his hands. They are warm and strong, and Sakura shudders at the thought of how many people he has killed with them. “It’s no use, miss. He’s dead.”

“No, he isn’t.”

“I’m sorry, miss.”

“But,” she whispers. “But he promised.”

Naruto closes his eyes, giving Sakura time to hastily wipe away a tear.



“The mission would’ve failed if it weren’t for him,” Naruto explains. “He sacrificed himself for this war. It’s because of him that we’ve won. Our country is free now, miss. We’re free. Because of him.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“He always said that sometimes you have to sacrifice the few to save the many—”

“But why him?” Sakura wails. “Why him of all people? God could’ve chosen anyone but him. Out of all the people, why did Sasuke-kun—*my* Sasuke-kun—have to be the one who died?”

“Maybe it was God’s purpose for him,” Naruto says softly, too softly for a man (boy) who was described to Sakura as loud and obnoxious. Sakura almost hates him for his empathy.

“I don’t believe it,” Sakura repeats. “Why couldn’t it be someone else? Please, sir. Please say it was someone else. Not Sasuke-kun. Anyone but my Sasuke-kun. Please.”

“I’m afraid that I can’t.”

She purses her lips and lets the tears flow unabashed. After all, the man (boy) opposite her is crying too.

“I watched him die,” Naruto says, his voice wavering. “I—I tried to save him, believe me, miss, I did. But I just... couldn’t get there on time, and there were so many enemies around us. They were shooting at us and setting off bombs everywhere. We just ran out of time. I’m sorry, miss. I am.”

Sakura chokes back a sob and shakes her head. “Don’t be,” she says. “Don’t be.”

They stand in silence for some time before Sakura opens her mouth and asks uncertainly, “Is it selfish of me, sir, to wish that someone else died instead of him?”

Naruto looks at her. He looks at her with those brilliant blue eyes that seem so pure and innocent despite what they must have seen; and he smiles that smile, that smile that says he understands everything. Sakura bets he doesn’t, though. “Of course it isn’t.”

“I must be a truly horrible person,” Sakura says, hiccupping.

“You aren’t, miss.”

“Oh, but I am. Because I’m standing here right now wishing with all my heart that it was someone else’s loved one that died. I wouldn’t have minded that. Whole cities could collapse. Hundreds of nameless, faceless people could perish, and I wouldn’t care as long as he was safe. That to me, sir, sounds selfish.”

There is another awkward pause. “They’re going to set up a memorial for him. For what he’s done for us,” Naruto says, changing the subject and wiping away his tears



on his sleeve. “He was a good man, miss.”

“I know he was.”

“He talked about you often, you know. Said that you were the only thing that made him keep going. And that the thought of seeing you after all this craziness was the only reason he managed to get up every day. I didn’t believe him at that time. He’s such a cold bastard, you see, miss. But when he talks about you, his eyes—they soften, kind of. And it’s like he’s not really with me. He said I’d have to meet you to understand, and said that he’d introduce you to me when we got back. I can see what he was talking about now.”

Then, it hits her. Sasuke is dead. He is dead, and he is never coming back. The fact sinks into her like a bullet, and once it does, it is suddenly all too much for Sakura. She reaches behind her and grabs her desk for support, her other hand is clamped over her mouth to stop the strangled cries from escaping.

“Miss? Miss, are you okay? You’re shaking,” Naruto says, concern evident in his too-blue eyes.

Sakura takes a moment to regain her composure before replying, “I’m fine. Really. I will be.”

Naruto looks at her skeptically.

“Really,” Sakura assures him.

“He loved you, you know,” Naruto says. “And he told me before he died—he told me to tell you that—that he’s sorry.”

Just when she thinks she’s broken, another part of her shatters.

“I have to go now, miss. My superiors want me in their office in ten minutes. I’ll see you around sometime, hopefully. I’m really sorry about Sasuke, miss.”

“Why?” she whispers, her eyes never leaving Naruto’s guilt-stricken face.

“Why what, miss?” Naruto asks, confused.

“Why is he sorry?”

Naruto takes some time before saying hesitantly, “He thinks he’s failed you.” With that, the blond wipes off any remaining tears and makes his way out of the room.

Sakura collapses on her chair, sobbing.

“Miss?” She hears the word and looks up. It’s Naruto, standing just outside her door, looking exactly the same as he had when he had brought her the news.

“Yes?” she croaks back.

“Don’t be so sad, miss. Sasuke wouldn’t have liked that,” Naruto says, almost apologetic. “He only wanted you to be happy, you know. Good day, miss.”



The next day, Sakura takes Sasuke's letters out of the box she has been keeping them in and burns all of them, save his last one.

She smiles bitterly as she rereads it for the hundredth time. "Widowed before my wedding day," she murmurs, laughing at the irony of it all.

Sakura looks at the tin, where the letters burn, watching as the flames die down, his words turning into ash. She leans in to get a closer look at the faintly glowing embers. It smells oddly like freedom.

Make-up Smeared Eyes

Sakura."

She didn't like the sound of his voice—she stopped liking it a while ago—but the way her name came out of his mouth sounded like he needed her. She knew she wasn't a necessity, though; she was more of an accessory, a pretty ornament that was put on display.

She knew the routine, and she prayed that somebody would save her from it, because she didn't like the feeling of her bare back against her cold wooden door. She didn't like having bruised lips in the morning. She didn't like to be called a whore. She didn't like the feeling of not being able to walk with her head held high anymore.

(Because, truthfully, the sight of her feet on the ground just reminded her that she couldn't even look at anyone in the eye anymore.)

Sakura kept her emotions locked in her heart and she made sure to throw out the key, made sure she could never find it again, for fear that her feelings would interfere with her relationships—this one in particular. She couldn't let her thoughts, wants, or opinions get involved in this; because once they did, her whole life would change drastically. She didn't really know how it would affect her, but her past experiences had taught her to fear risks.

She felt her whole body go numb at the touch of his cold fingertips, as she tried her hardest not to stiffen suddenly. Her hands felt nothing unfamiliar as they tangled with threads of slippery black. She felt her nails scratch against his scalp, as he pressed his lips against hers harder.

Sometimes, she wondered why she had ever wanted this. It was her dream, but why was it so painful?





“Dear, how’s everything going? We miss you a lot! We can’t even remember to lock the door without you reminding us. Call us when you have time. We know you’re really busy, but even just a quick hello will be nice. Love you, take care.”

Sakura sat up as she listened to her mother’s cheery tone on her voicemail, envying how easy it was for her to deal with everything. The sheets were tangled around her legs and Sasuke’s body, and she knew he was awake when she felt his arms wrap around her waist and pulled her down again.

“Who was that?” he asked, his thin lips curving downwards as the beginning of a scowl.

She shot him a venomous look, her green eyes flickering slightly from the reflection of the small rays of sunlight peeking through the blinds. He watched her eyes suddenly became dull after she blinked, as if something came and washed them clean of emotion. She became like a mirror of him—her face just as impassive as his while she ran her pale fingers through her hair to get out the troublesome knots.



“My mother. I hope you’re satisfied with that answer,” she replied, her voice strong but soft at the same time. He loosened his grip on her as she threw off the sheets and swung her legs off the side of the bed, rummaging through her closet for a clean uniform. She flung the white button up shirt, viridian tie, and green skirt onto the carpeted floor, curling her toes when she heard the springs of the bed creek as Sasuke shifted on the bed.

“I’m going to shower,” she said, nearly spat, only holding back because he would surely slap her for being too rude. She reached down right next to her dresser and picked up her lime green shower basket, placing it below her elbow like a purse. Sakura grabbed her champagne colored towel and slung it on her shoulder, stretching a little farther away to grab her clothes. She picked a ball of socks and her previously discarded undergarments up from the floor and slipped on some flip-flops, flats dangling from the fingers of her left hand.

Sasuke only grunted in reply, and she somehow hated his lack of response. It ticked her off slightly, but she was used to it already. She cared too much for him, thought too much about him—she needed to get him out of her head, out of her life. She still closed the door slowly and softly so he wouldn’t wake up, still shared an umbrella with him when it rained on their way back from class—but nothing felt real. It was like an act the two put up so other people would be happy, so her friends could go, “Sakura, you’re so lucky that Sasuke’s your boyfriend. He’s so dreamy!”

The two had less of a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship, or at least Sakura believed so. It seemed like a friends-with-benefits kind of thing, and she didn’t really know how much longer she could take it. It didn’t even seem like they were friends—they only took one class together, and they barely even talked to each other.

Sakura ran her hands through her hair and shampooed, noticing that a bit of her pink hair-dye was wearing off at the roots of her hair. Once she could sneak off campus again, she needed to go get some more—she was getting a lot of compliments from everyone on the outrageous color. Not a single word from Sasuke, though.

While wrapping the towel around her body, she snapped her shoes against the tiled floor towards the mirror and the sink, beginning to brush her teeth. Sakura stared into the mirror, her neatly plucked eyebrows slightly lifted and jade eyes widened slightly. Looking at her face and comparing it to other girls’ faces, she thought she was bland, boring. She wished she could be plainer, simpler, uglier—anything that would make that Uchiha stop thinking she was interesting. He obviously didn’t pick girls by their personality, since he barely even talked to her now.

There was nothing nice about her, nothing special. All her “appealing” or “surprising” assets were basically fake—when she was a freshman, she wore a B cup bra when she was actually an AA, her hair was dyed bubblegum pink and her roots were dark brown, she was below average in height and had to wear five-inch heels just to appear average, and she never smiled “charmingly” like people said she did. Her personality wasn’t great, either—she was overly violent, and beat people up if they got on her nerves,



and she refused to allow anyone know what she feels. In Sakura's opinion, she was probably the least desirable kind of girl out there. So what did Sasuke see in her?

Perhaps she was over-thinking this—maybe Sasuke didn't see anything. Maybe that's what he liked—or preferred, if he didn't have any kind of emotional attachment to her. Perhaps, she was so unlikeable that Sasuke knew he would fail to form any kind of bond with her.

Yes, that had to be it. It was definitely it. Because boyfriends that loved you wouldn't just leave your room without saying goodbye.

They took economics class together. That was when they actually met—the first time was through some friends at a party. They weren't seated next to each other before that, ever. Sakura knew who he was, because she remembered all the times Ino gushed about how handsome and intelligent he was. She didn't really think Sasuke was all that, really—just a boy with a pretty face and almost no personality. But she had to admit that he was mysterious, and she loved the thrill of mystery. At that point, she had a kind of affection and admiration for him—he kept to himself, mostly, and she couldn't deny that he was good-looking and smart. Ino was right, but for whatever reason, she knew she had to get away from him.

Sakura didn't know what was going to happen, but she knew she had to get away. It felt like he was going to eat her, or he was going to destroy all the pieces she used to build her life. He was going to bring change, and Sakura despised change—she feared it, almost like how a three-year-old was afraid of the dark or the monsters lurking in the closet. Sasuke, in some ways, was the devil disguised as an aesthetically pleasing human being.

She carefully picked out her seat, one that's far, far away from him, so she'd never have to ever talk to him or look at him because she knew she'd find herself falling in love. The teacher usually paired people up by their seating arrangement—her partner was usually the extremely shy girl, Hinata. It was perfect—he'd never have to even glance at her, for there were no windows or bulletin boards nearby, and he would never have to walk past her when class was over. He wouldn't have to contact her or touch her, and there was no chance of Sakura ever bumping into him. All his other classes were different, and he lived in the other side of campus.

But slowly, his mysterious charm started to lure her in, and soon enough, she was probably obsessing over him as much as his fan club was, except that it was all in her mind. She couldn't risk being exposed as a “Sasuke-kun fan girl.” It would be a terrible name, and rumors would probably spread about how she screwed every guy to get him jealous. After all, she had heard those things about Ino before.

Sakura was clean the entire freshman year. No sort of contact with Uchiha Sasuke—not even a glance. She was relieved, but she couldn't deny she that it had hurt. It hurt her to know that she couldn't sneak a peek at him without feeling extremely



guilty. It was painful to have to build her wall all over again—she didn't know how she could have let it fall after all the effort she had done for four years, but her barrier was gone. It was broken; and each time Sakura tried to pick up a piece, it would turn out that the pieces were glass where she could see the tears in her eyes. During those days, she figured it would be easier to just give up and let herself break.

He talked to her a week after she had learned to suppress her internal pain, only a little into sophomore year. The teacher was extremely fed up with Naruto, the boy who sat to her right. The blond was always attempting to charm Sakura and Hinata into being his girlfriend, but he never was able to succeed with Sakura. Hinata was falling head over heels in love with him even with such a reserved, shy disposition. It was obvious the girl was always giggling every time Naruto would speak. However, she never exploded with joy—she always resisted the urge, for she was never that expressive in the first place.

As Naruto began to list cheesy pick-up lines that amused Hinata, Sakura was busy fixing pencils in her hair buns. The teacher droned on and on, but suddenly the blue-eyed boy laughed heartily.

He was ordered to switch seats with Uchiha Sasuke, and Sakura was both thrilled and agitated. She could not decide which emotion she felt stronger, she only recalled living in the moment as he sat down next to her and sighed—out of happiness, relief, or displeasure, Sakura did not know. Being next to him already made her giddy, so she buried her face in her books and had her hair in her face the entire class.

She was proud when she didn't even spare him a glance on her way out of the room.

“Be my girlfriend.”

It was not a question, only a command, and Sakura was completely unprepared for the question, dropping her notebook into her tote bag in the process. Her green eyes widened, but she was almost sure they were shining brighter that day. It was any girl's dream come true, and for a moment she felt like she was floating.

“Why?” she blurted, without thinking, because her mental defenses were down the drain. She must not get close to this boy. Hadn't she engraved this in her own mind? Hadn't she strategically picked her seat so that she'd never see this boy? Hadn't she congratulated herself every time she ignored him? *Get away.* She was getting ready to leave, and she thanked her feet for moving. All she wanted to do was run, run like her mind was telling her.

Then, he pulled her to him and kissed her. It wasn't a soft, fairytale kiss. It wasn't passionate or loving, it wasn't emotional and heartfelt. It was a harsh, raw, hungry, cold kiss that Sakura never expected. It wasn't even a kiss, just his lips grinding against hers. She hated her body for going along with it—her barriers were again shattering into pieces. She had spent the past half-year or so preparing herself just to



have it all go to waste. Her eyes drifted shut, and she could feel herself float into a dream-like state. It was the moment when she despised herself more than she ever had before, yet she couldn't stop.

She should've known that the moment didn't really mean anything to him—he never even held her hand or bothered to embrace her, only pushed against her lips and waited for her to do her job.

“You have to leave him, Sakura,” Ino pleaded, long fingernails digging into Sakura's arm when she grabbed her. All Ino could see was the agony in Sakura's eyes—it was painful to see Sakura transforming into a nearly suicidal girl. No, there weren't scars on her wrists, but her clothes were stained with alcohol and her skirts constantly smelled like marijuana.

“He's your dream guy,” Sakura replied simply, not even attempting to elaborate. She knew Sasuke didn't love her—he didn't even like her—but he wanted her more than he wanted anybody else. For now, that was enough. It wasn't about the future anymore. It was about the present, what people lived for now, not what was going to happen ten years later. He taught her that.

“Ugh, I'm not going to date him.”

“Back off.”

“Stop being so defensive.”

Sakura freed herself from Ino's grasp and didn't bother to look back as she began to run. It had been two weeks after he left her while she was showering, and he didn't even look at her in class that day. Sakura finally reached the edge of the campus, and she felt everything build up in her throat. The liquid dripped out of her mouth onto the black gravel, flowing downhill into a drain. Sakura wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and popped a mint.

She shuddered for a moment, and it wasn't from the cold. She'd been having massive headaches recently, causing her to sleep at random times, and she needed at least six cups of coffee to function properly in a day now. Yet she was still exhausted.

She grabbed her hair and weaved it through her fingers when she hurled again. Her unoccupied hand flew to her stomach and rubbed it, dreading what this could mean.

She covered her head with her hood and followed the black road with yellow lines towards town, letting the black of her mascara trickle down her cheeks and sink into her skin.

She was beginning to get used to the darkness of the room and the humidity that floated in through the open window. Her clothes stuck to her skin uncomfortably. The only thing that could comfort Sakura was the fresh smell of rain. It made her feel clean.



There was a faint knocking on the door—for a moment Sakura didn't know if it was just her imagination or reality. However, it became louder.

"Sakura, please open the door. We all know you need to be less of a drama queen."

Only Ino would say that, Sakura was sure of it. Pushing the covers away, she shuffled past the clothes that were discarded all over the floor, kicking a button-down shirt out of the way.

All Ino could see when she opened the door were Sakura's brilliant green eyes. So green, green like grass. But they were red and watery, too. She had lipstick smeared on her cheeks and black running down from the corners of her eyes to her pointed chin. Her hair was flat and was starting to get darker. Some damp strands stuck to her forehead, the one Ino used to make fun of all the time.

Sakura looked like a disaster.

"I—sorry. Are you...okay?" She realized what a stupid question it was—Sakura was in pain, in so much pain. She only tried to put on a mask of serenity, even when her heart was falling apart and she felt more lost than she ever had in her life.

The broken girl collapsed when Ino embraced her. The blonde was more caring than anybody had been to Sakura in months.

"It's him, isn't it?" Ino whispered, unbearably pained to watch Sakura crumble like this. Her dry, cracked lips didn't move one bit.

"Please, please, please. Say something. Let me know that you're there. What can I do? How can I help? Tell me you're okay."

There was a tense silence when Ino closed her eyes, waiting patiently for a response. All she heard was shallow breathing. Then, a deep breath.

"...I'm okay."

Both of them knew she wasn't.

God didn't care much for her despair. He didn't even try to lend her a helping hand when she stood in front of his door, Sasuke's door, which was painted a plain off-white with a golden knob; it's as flawless in appearance as he was. That door, his entire room, was good enough for a prince, she was sure.

The fluorescent light of the hallway flickered rapidly, almost as quickly as Sakura blinked to hold back her tears. She bit her lip and wiped away her tears. Ino was waiting for her; she was there for her.

"No matter what you do I'll be here." That's what Ino told her when Sakura had no more secrets to spill. It seemed like the blue-eyed girl was the only one in the world that could save her from being too lonely.



She raised her trembling hand and pulled up her turtleneck to cover her mouth. She wanted to hide and disappear at the moment. Her finger moved to touch a flake of gray paint on the wall. She started tapping against the wall, reminding her of the frustrating noise she used to make when she played piano, when her long nails would clack against the ivory keys until they broke.

Abruptly, she stopped. Get this over with. When she was poised to knock, he opened the door.

“What?” he hissed, eyes frighteningly cold. “Stop making that noise.”

“I already stopped.” She was already tearing, the salty liquid nearly falling out of her eyes. She blinked several times more, until her lashes had droplets of water on them. Her nails dug into the palms of her hands. Sakura directed her eyes towards the floor, unsure of what to say next. She examined the mud that sank into her white laces earlier.

He sighed, loudly, and she could imagine him running his hand through his hair. He always did that. “Just say whatever you need to say,” he finally said, breaking the minutes of silence. He was becoming impatient. He hated it when people wasted his time.

She paused and licked her lips. She looked up, but was terrified to meet his eyes. She pretended to be fascinated at the flake of gray paint and how the light fell on it ever so often.

“I’m pregnant.” She exhaled shakily, pulling her hands into her sleeves and hunching her shoulders over. She said it, and it just made her want to hide more.

“Don’t give me that crap.” Sasuke reacted immediately, his obsidian eyes fixed on her small figure, glaring. “This won’t make me care.”

“What should I do?” she whispered, the words slipping out of her mouth unintentionally. “I...I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t care,” he answered, ready to close the door on her.

“But I love you,” Sakura cried. It sounded like such a stupid confession. Her voice was hoarse from screaming into pillows, her tone was pathetically desperate. She wasn’t even sure if she loved him. How could she?

He shifted his weight to his left foot. The flickering light illuminated the right side of his face, but she couldn’t read his expression. He was always like that, mysterious. He didn’t say a thing, only kept an unreadable expression on his face.

“Sorry—never mind. I don’t know what I’m saying,” she decided to say, hoping that she could take back her words. “I don’t need your help.”

“Just leave,” he commanded, closing his eyes and furrowing his brows in frustration. His hand moved to the door, ready to close it. “I don’t care about that thing. Keep it or kill it, it doesn’t matter.”



“I don’t need you.”

When Sakura heard the slamming of the door, she realized that was the biggest lie she had ever told.

Mauer

1987

For the first time in the long months of continuous interrogation, he feels the sunlight.

The gentle ray—probably eight in the morning, he guesses from the mild heat—brushes across his pale brow. He refuses to blink from the sudden brightness and stares unflinchingly at the smiling, bespectacled man in front of him.

Hohenschoenhausen, they aptly call this place. He remembers from the hushed whispers that ghost every part of Leipzig, *the house of horrors*. But there is nothing horrifying in this quaint little picture: cream-yellow plush carpets, a mahogany coffee table in the center, the dainty chairs and chintz-covers. In fact, the only thing that stands out is his steel stool and the cuffs behind his back.

It seems surreal that such a room exists in this bleak, hellish dungeon.

(and yes, dungeon. that assessment is not far from the truth.)

“The weather is quite wonderful outside.”

He knows that those congenial tones and that considerate drawing of the chartreuse tapestry are being used against him, a weapon to break down his mind.

“How long have you been...ah, down there?” The smile on his captor’s face is accommodating, but it is far from pleasant.

“Ten months.”

This officer, they know him as the one with that astonishing silver hair, the one who enjoys a cup of tea while watching men being prodded with electrodes and drowned in water, is now grinning.

“Impressive.”

But they know that since there are prying eyes from the other side, the supposed-to-be righteous humane world, they have to keep the injuries at a minimum.

(less physical scars, less irrevocable evidence.)





There is one thing that this brilliant doctor also excels at, one that is more damaging than lashes and electricity.

“Most men would have forgotten the span of time. Being surrounded by windowless walls, deprived of sleep, isolated from any human contact...” he trails off, curious brown eyes roving on his naked torso, his grey orbs, the unmarred skin. “But I should’ve known, right? You were his brother after all.”



Spectacles glint, sharply attentive to the telltale signs of aggression or nervousness.

But Sasuke is different. He does not even flinch at the mention of his brother.

“I know Itachi, of course. His skills were valuable in our field.” Now the pale officer carefully walks slowly towards the comfortable seat, a silver pen twirling quickly as he clicks it open. “Many fools still try their best to beat his excellent standards. But unlike him...” Then, he scribbles the time fast on the piece of paper, logging in the start of this damned routine. “I know where the winning side is.”

Kabuto finally raises his head, folds his glasses, and widens his smile. Sasuke knows that he will see it plastered on that bastard’s face the whole day.

“Now shall we get to business?”

Sasuke hears the click of the recorder, but both of them know what sound it will reflect at the end of eighteen hours: his sweet music of silence.

1982

“Who is she?”

Karin is a pretty red-head and the only female in their small team. She is usually dressed in her best wardrobe and sparkling skirts, but tonight, she wears her patched-up leather jacket and a faded gray dress. Her lipstick-smeared lips and mascara-stained eyes tell him that she is going for another recon. But she is languidly leaning on his doorframe, an unlit cigarette on her fingers, staring at it intently as she avoids his intense glare.

At first, he thinks if Karin knows *them*.

(he shudders, and the first thought that flashes in his mind is they will die, they will die. he is weak, he is careless, he cannot even protect them.)

Eighteen, a skilled sweet talker and enticingly voluptuous, Sasuke knows that she excels in information gathering, almost as good as that deceased blonde girl (*was it yamanaka?*) that the camp had executed last month. He knows that she is very talented in her line of work, as she can wean out anything valuable from men with the mere flutter of her lashes and the swing of her hips. Her face is a perfect mask, and her neck is powdered evenly to hide the map of bruises.

This girl-woman seems to harbor a misplaced adoration for him, and Sasuke decides that Karin is not prying because she wants to use the knowledge against him; maybe, she is merely curious since he never speaks of anything related to his life. And maybe she expects him to open up as they have been together in this cell for almost three years.



Karin likes him—every woman he meets seems to predictably fall for him—even, he dares to assume, that she cares for him too. He does not understand why she joins his disastrous path, joins him in the search to kill that bastard who murdered his only kin, but one thing is clear: they are merely accomplices. He trusts her on the validity of her wiretapped conversations from assorted departments, he even trusts her with his life.

But he will never entrust *her* life—

(you dead last, I will kill you if you ever let her come close to the damned wall. and for once, he appreciates that even though there is no brain beneath his yellow head, the moron grimly nods and he is assured with that blue-fire promise within his friend-comrade's stare. they will not lose her soft laugh, her mirror-green eyes, her entirety. her. her.)

—to anyone else.

In this world, where spouses spy on each other and children are trained to betray their parents by the government, intense paranoia is common in everyone. But Sasuke specializes in one craft, something that his cursed blood is innate in: the art of treason.

That is why he lies.

“No one important.”

Karin frowns, a worried retort on her lips, but he interrupts her just the same, “There’s a briefing tomorrow. Go back to your station.”

Her high heels shift, a silent language to approach carefully or to avoid him. He expects her offers of a night to *forget forget, don't all men want it? I can help you forget* but all Sasuke hears is a different voice, softer, passionate, and soothing, answering him with a calm *if i can only break down those walls*.

He always rejects these considerate proposals, as he can never let his guard down.

Fortunately, Karin lets out an awkward goodnight, dark skirt swishing in hurry.

(suigetsu had stormed inside his place this afternoon, ranting at how karin always wanders around the accursed bulle. the young man just saw her riding up on those lime green volga mobiles rounding up the deserted streets.

sasuke easily deciphers those angry protests.

someday, those two will realize what's behind all their spats and bickering. will become lovers, perhaps. even have their happily ever after. a future. and being the miser that he is, he does not say anything. he lets them figure it out, even slightly resents that they have a chance.)



Later that night, Sasuke finds the battered frog-leather wallet, lights the single candle on a bent holder to illuminate his miserable room, and then finally, his careful fingers pick a folded white paper.

He slowly opens it, unfolding it four times. It reveals a clumsily taken image, with a blurred background of an old university and a dark cast of clouds in its unmoving sky. It is *evident* that it is a picture taken in haste and secrecy, as it appears to slant unevenly.

(that idiot. he snorts. a year ago. the stupid fool punches him and throws the old photograph to his bleeding face with a growl, and says that he forgot to pick it up at his house when he left. the dead-last just ran after him to deliver the said image.)

There is a girl of fourteen on the beat-up picture, nearly torn in its sides. She is short, wearing a patterned red sweater and is running across the empty courtyard. Her hair flares wildly, arcing on the air like wings on her back as she glances back to the camera with a laugh. Seven lines mark the image, a crisscross of creases that measures the span of her arms, the length of her stride.

She drags a boy of thirteen, with dark bed-head hair and is tall enough to outmatch the girl's pace. He is wearing the customary black uniform for sophomores. There must have been a thin, disgruntled frown as he seems to look heaven ward, praying for patience.

Sasuke knows what is really happening behind the annoyed façade: that the boy is waging a losing battle to stop the smile on his youthful face, but he manages a compromise by allowing a small smirk and he tightens his grasp as she continues to drag him towards the nearby sweet shop.

(exactly a week after the image was taken, he takes the most important thing from her when he leaves: the seven last words that she sobs, ich...ich liebe dich von ganzem herzen, out cold in the night.

he steals her heart.)

He reverently hovers the picture over the fire, looks at it for a long time; commits the colors and the warmth of her hold to memory. For the first time, he lets the bitterness seep in.

(sasuke understands what needs to be done.)

Its edges sublime first to clusters of white wisps; the smell of burnt cherries fills the room. The flames finally reach the edges of her open-mouthed smile, deforming it into a painful frown.

"Don't look at me like that," his usual laidback tone is gone. Sasuke hisses them like a child (*she always makes him feel like a brat*), masking his terrible guilt with an angry bluster.



(his fingers almost reach to pull it back, the only thing he has of her. but he can never face the wretched possibilities of them knowing. If anyone discovers his association with her—)

Sasuke is familiar with the stirrings of hate and anger. That is why he recognizes these thoughts flitting in his mind: he is angry with Karin, for breaching things that should never be mentioned. He is livid at Sakura for being so damn *weak*. But he loathes himself the most, because he cares enough to protect her.

He waits till the picture becomes crumpled ashes and fruit-scented smoke; the warm remains crumble upon the slightest touch. To watch it burn is the least he can do; this is the punishment he deserves.

Sasuke owes Sakura that much.

The wicker flickers as he turns his back and walks away.

Sasuke does not want her eyes to haunt him again tonight.

1984

“Scheiße.”

Shit is the right description of what is happening right now. The curse is an unheard sound in this dissonant bustle as men in dark green coats are almost gaining on them. Hot bullets are grazing their feet, but the wet concrete on the other side is open and will grant them out of this hell.

Sasuke is only left with three meters before he reaches his escape.

(waiting, waiting, waiting, he hopes she will be waiting.)

A sharp, acute pain radiates to his knees and he stumbles.

Suigetsu and Karin are about to turn as they see him fall far from the gaping wide exit, but they are pulled inside as the others shove them with the hundreds who are stumbling in fear and exhilaration. The wild warnings from the *Grepos* are becoming louder and louder, the rifles are burning their magazines judging from the succession of shots being fired.

And then, he sees that Naruto is in front him.

(he hears the rumors, under the tunnels and whispering alleys, that there is a blond boy of nineteen octobers who is too loud for incognito, too eager to brawl. he comes from a paradise where you can see the sunsets, and laugh freely without the fear of having the people you love stab your unprotected back. he paves the way for the lost souls of the east to return back to the west.



when he asks the name of who made the escape route, he is surprised to hear the handler say, a damned blue-eyed fox.)

Uzumaki Naruto is his bestfriend—more of a younger brother, if Itachi will be more compliant to his insane one-sided, nocturnal conversations. He is one of those idiots who actually had the gall to cross the wall two years ago to chase after him.

He never seeks the dead-last to confront him why on earth he risked his life to enter a hellion's heaven, but when he sees him standing over him, he finally understands.

“Say sorry to my pretty cousin for me, will you?” He chortles, and spasms in silent laughter. “Tell her I tried to bring your stubborn ass bac—”

Naruto chokes on his own blood.

Sasuke watches him fall down, taking the bullets with a happy grin.

The only thing he wants to do to that idiotic Uzumaki at that moment, in the midst of the terrifying screams and the echoing gunfire, is to crack that fucking numbskull for doing such a stupid, stupid thing.

(heroes only look cool when they're alive, *sakura mutters in one of their history study groups*, so don't do something...so impulsive naruto, like that graffiti you did on the school walls? i don't want to hear that you're leading some rebel group for a freaking revolution someday.)

When his body falls on his dirt-stained arm (*that dipshit eats too much bread and noodles, and no, he refuses to cry out in anger and desperation and grief and why did someone die again again*), he struggles to stand and heave him on his shoulders.

He has to get away and make this idiot live and shout that he should *tell that to Sakura yourself, moron*.

But then, he feels the hard butt of a shot gun flying at the back of his head, the second blow on his gut, the shout of *the blond one, he broke down the wall. one more shot to his head—*

A ringing gunshot is the last thing Sasuke hears before he falls unconscious.

1990

Official Reports of *Rounde Ecke*:

It is said that no harm was done to the newly released prisoner no. 1293129 on November 23, 1988



- 5' 8". Physically healthy, dark-hair, and possibly from a blue-blooded Japanese ancestry
- Implemented proper measures to ensure that the suspect will talk in an interrogation under duress, intensive.
- Detained during his first ten months under the U-boat—

In the bottom of the paper is the crisply written printed name (*OROCHIMARU*) under the curly, neat signature.

After signing the contract and admitting his participation in threatening the stability of peace, Uchiha Sasuke provides information on how to fortify the walls in exchange of providing him residence back to his estate. Though, he is still under massive surveillance—

1979

“No.”

There is a quick tempo of music playing on the old stereo—*L'inverno allegro*, his mind supplies immediately, *Vivaldi*. It fills their sitting room, the rapid transcending of strings always sounding new to his ears. In his childhood place, back there in the East, listening to any music at all is a forbidden luxury. They claim that it is useless and soporific. But the rush of notes coincide with the flow of the blood in his head, hardly soothing his seething state.

“You don’t understand,” Sasuke almost spits the words. “My brother is dead.”

“I will not allow you to go back.”

“He is the only family I have.”

Hatake is a slacker, a leech and an undeniable genius.

He always hides his face in a mask, a combination of knitted dark blue stripped scarves, and always spends his days reclining on his favorite cushioned chair with an old erotica classic on his hands and a cold beer on his unvarnished coffee table.

Everyone knows that he may appear unimportant, loitering around public premises like the frequent homeless beggars in the streets during weekends, but it is an entirely different matter when he resumes his place over a desk filled with stolen blueprints and classified pictures.



As a bastard son of the Uchiha scions, Kakashi has been oddly affectionate to Sasuke, the purest blood of Hatake's detractors. He never knows the reason for this, but he will never question it.

(he is many things to sasuke: his mentor. his brother. his father.)

"I don't like to repeat myself." There is a warning in his tone, that he will do anything to keep him enclosed.

And because they are so alike in many ways, Sasuke does not reply; he will not repeat his answer to his command.

(i will find his murderer.)

As the sole violin reaches the hair-raising crescendo, Sasuke feels the thick, suffocating fury that he is supposed to feel towards Kakashi. But a second later, there is only nonchalance, and a tired sigh.

Mismatched eyes—a lone slate orb and an unseeing red sclera—pins him to rear in his temper. "It won't bring him back even if you return. There is nothing you can do."

"Nothing?" The growl is almost animalistic in anger. "I can go to the other side and rip the fucking throat—"

Kakashi is cool and indifferent as Sasuke lashes out, but whatever harsh words to come are left unknown when a familiar chime cuts through the dangerous tension.

"Yes?" Kakashi presses a button, a quiet gaze on the fuming young lad.

"Professor? Oh, good evening!" says a meek voice, one that both are more than acquainted with. *"Is Sasuke there? I've got some of his schoolwork. I heard that he was...sick today."*

"Ah." Kakashi never fails to notice everything, so when Sasuke falters with his vindictive stare, he almost twitches in amusement. "Sakura. Yes. Wait a minute, alright?"

"I was just going to leave. I'll just place it on the mail and—"

"Why don't you come in?"

There is a sharp inhale.

"He needs to rest. I'll just—"

"Sasuke is going downstairs."

"But—"

The small click is very loud to a silent room, signifying that their conversation is over.

"Get the door."

He then tilts his head, the one eye creases to form a smile, argument forgotten.



“And it’s getting late. Walk her home.”

Sasuke walks with resignation, knowing that to ask for his cooperation on how to breach the borders is definitely not a possibility.

He opens the smoke-painted door, schooling his features to detachment.

Their walk to her home is uneventful, passing through the well-cleaned suburban hedges and the quaint little homes. It is quite a walk to Sakura’s moderate two-storey house from his apartment complex, but the streets are pleasant enough for a leisurely stroll.

As the minutes progress slowly, this Sakura—who avoids his gaze, haunches her shoulders and unsmiling—is different. She always talks of the little things if they do not see each other for days, of how Mr. Iruka punts Naruto to the next life, of how the old janitor gives her pretzels for helping him with the early morning clean-ups. She will talk just to fill his painful silences, just to ease him up, and will settle to a tranquil pace when they pass a certain point on this well-worn road.

They stand in between the fenced graves, where the queue of crosses soak on the last light of the day and the obstinate stone barrier stretches to hide the other side. Behind her, the sun is settling to rest on its mandarin, cloud-clustered bed and Sasuke is sick of seeing it.

He wants to watch the sun rise on the east now.

“I’m sorry.” Heartfelt sorrow seeps in her apology. “I didn’t mean to hear all of that.”

He stops and turns around to look at her dejected form, biting her lips in an effort not to submit to the nervousness she usually feels when they are alone.

(it makes him unreasonably pleased that only he can make this incredibly rare, strong woman uneasy. that he is the only one who sees the trembling of her hands when she flips over the pages before examinations, her unsure questions when she asks him about an equation.

the one who sees her insecurities behind her confidence.

and because she lets him see her, he lets her know that he used to cry when he was afraid of the dark. he tells her that he hates sweet things and prefers to be at home during weekends. he tries—god, how hard he tries—to let her understand him.

that is why he allows her to hold his hand now.)

“If only,” her voice is strong and willful, but it nearly cracks as she quickly avoids his sharply turned gaze. “If only I can break down those walls.”

“But you can’t,” Sasuke replies with a curt bite.



“But if I can break them, maybe—maybe you’ll...”

Her next words are almost a hurried mumble, something that makes the rosy hue on her cheeks travel to the tips of her ears that are peeking out of her soft (*it’s almost glowing, as the lantern just illuminates her perfectly*) strands. Her deep green eyes (*he can almost see the lightening of greens in her irises, a golden halo on her dilating pupils*) are staring at the white-washed crosses, avoiding his intense look. Her hands (*surprisingly filled with silver linings, thin marks and scars of burns and cuts, nevertheless it still appears smooth*) clench and unclench on the hem of her pencil skirt in anxiety as she pouts and mutters a *forget it*.

The proximity is almost stifling, but when she moves to lay her lips upon his, their distance seems too far and he wants to close it.

But he does not budge. He does not even breathe.

This is not right. That is the reason why he does not give in. Why he lays unmoving, unaffected, ignoring the unfurling heat that curls over his chest prompted by her light, fluttering touches. (*you will hurt her, bastard. hurt her hurt her. you will leave her one day.*) Her exhale is immediate, the familiar cloying scent wafting to him, welcoming warmth caressing the shell of his ear.

Sakura withdraws back—not only her hands, her arms and her lips. Her face is now hidden under the layers of her hair that it reminds him of that small little girl crying on the corner of the sandbox. Her whole body trembles as she steps back from him, with shuddering small gasps, as if trying hard not to dissolve into tears and cower in embarrassment.

“I shouldn’t have—I’ll go. Forget this. I-I won’t—”

(*you will leave her tonight.*)

He does not hear the cautious warning of his conscience.

Sasuke will always be selfish. So he will take and never give back.

When he captures the pair of pale, pale crimson lips, he captures a memorable taste of her favorite soda that she offers every lunch and lazy enjoyable afternoons—the tangy sweetness of apples and bitter frost of the sparkling water; the *apfelsaftschorle* is lukewarm-cold on his tongue, and surprisingly reminds him of cold autumn days.

And in that early evening, where the pinpoints of light peaks out over the towering asphalt and basalt, she promises him everything.

“*Ich,*” she whispers in between ragged breaths, “*bleibe hier.*”

This wakes him up. Like a child caught red-handed, he pulls away his entangled hand on her short coral locks. He retreats, and swerves to turn away to the other direction, to pass by the shadow of the white graves.



(years later, on some rotting, dank, dark cell, this becomes an agonizing memory for sasuke. because this is where he lets her destroy his walls, and shows him, without any effort at all, how weak he truly is.)

Sakura knows him more than anyone can ever understand—because he lets her tug on the hem of his blue wife-beater jacket behind, and he allows her to grip it tight.

He wants her to stop him.

(don't let go.)

Because both of them know that even if he only possesses the clothes behind his back, he will leave with any given opportunity.

“I—”

She sobs, knowing what will come next.

“I love you with all my heart.”

And he says the only appropriate response.

“Please, Sasuke. Please. Don’t go. I mean, you might die and—”

He will not give her hope. He will not give her the truth.

“Stop being annoying.”

The most merciful thing he can do is to crush her heart.

“But Sasuke, please. You can’t just leave! Everyone will—”

“I don’t care.”

(contrary to popular—the dumb idiot, especially—belief, the lie is quite easy to say. the only thing that stops him from taking the words back is the notion that his words can give her something more precious than his sanity: her peace of mind. to know that she can sleep everyday without the thought of being murdered in her bed. the thought of her killing herself in worry for him.)

“If you go, then I can come with you! Please, it’s dangerous out there!”

Both of her hands now hold onto his left cuff, onto the back of his shirt.

“Please, let me go with you. I can help you and—”

“Sakura.”

For one last time, he turns to her slowly. He does not let her see his face as he tenderly unclasps the tight vise-like hold on him. He does not let his fingers stay a second longer on her fragile wrist, on her lithe arms as he steps back till he can no longer feel her radiating heat.

“Thank you.”



And he lets her see how broken he is: an uncaring man who only smirks at her tear-stained face.

Her loafers grind and crackle against the small pebbles as she steps back from him with a wide, wet-brimming stare. Her mouth, which he desperately tries to forget the lingering aftertaste of, gives another shuddering exhale. Her knees fail to support her and she falls before him, crumpling, silent tears raining before his feet.

(she takes his gratitude as an acceptance, as a rejection. his rational mind says that you did it for her but he will never ever forgive himself for years.)

He walks away. He does not turn back.

He does not want to see her anymore.

(as broken as him.)

The next day, Uchiha Sasuke's desk is empty.

A day later, Sakura confesses through a broken phone call to a fuming platinum-haired aunt that he is now walking underneath an endless red-sky, painted by the rising sun.

1989

wir bleibe hier!

The furious crowd chants them in bursts of a thunderous booming cadence under a cool November sky. It starts with a distant scream from an overzealous young man that reminds him too much of home. *(he almost sees a can of orange spray paint and a golden mop of hair when the voice screams again and again at the top of the heavily-defaced wall: we are staying here!*

he hears a different voice though, when he hears that lone cry. it echoes softly in the hollows of his notions, but it is not less passionate.

ich bleibe hier.

there is resolve when he repeats it again in his mind:

i am staying here.)

The fault line in the middle of the indomitable barrier lengthens, cracking resonantly to create an orchestra of chipping rock and eager cheers. This odd symphony is becoming a highly-anticipated swan song of this tiring tale, and Sasuke wants to hear the last blessed note.



And at that swelling moment where the music plays in a speechless second, when the concrete curtain cracks, crumbles and becomes a gaping, uneven window, a mosaic of surprised gazes that rove at their equally astounded expressions—

He sees her.

There is a vivid pink beacon among the throng of bright yellow heads and of dark hazel crowns. He notices her haunted eyes—almost a reflection of his—peering carefully behind a towering back and she pants another cold mist when she tries to tiptoe to look beyond the obstructions.

And because it is an apparition created by his ill mind, he can almost trace with his unfailing vision of *those are tears* on the precipice of her clear eyes. Her blunt, unpainted nails flit across them, wiping them impatiently and outstretch them over the scarred wall.

She smiles.

The following roar rings deafly on his ears, like the standing ovation of a well-played performance. A wave of sleeved limbs rises up, surging like a tide, blocking his view. Warm bodies smother him coldly—like the confining cold bars, the monstrous fortresses he had to fight every single struggling day.

He is unable to catch a glimpse of her again, as that mesmerizing vision is swallowed by the massive flood of liberated souls.

Sasuke refuses to follow the strong current of bodies and waits with his knuckles clenched, feet rooted on his spot again. His dark eyes (*frantically*) search the ocean of strangers, transfixed to where she has stood before. But there is no sign of her, it is impossible not to notice even if she is small. (she'll never grow up, *the mere idea of her makes him want to gut himself because obviously she's not here*)

The young man tensely swallows, his throat painfully bobbing as he holds back the urge to call her name, as fear begins to dilute on his veins, settle on his heart, and circulate throughout the every pore of his being. He has never felt this way before—lost and unsure, trying not to panic.

She is not here.

She will not be here.

Sakura has already moved on.

It is plausible. It is even the most logical explanation why his damned mind is playing tricks on him. He almost wants to laugh at how she finally listens to him. Listens to a fool that believes that he has the right to hope, that she will be waiting for him when he gives up everything—gives *her* up.

He takes in the scene before him: a father ruffling a red-nosed son, a mother alternately kissing the cheeks of her daughter, estranged lovers who are whispering tearful nothings to each other—the list can go on and on of what is happening.



And Sasuke is already free to achieve this same kind of happiness: a sort-of-beginning where tomorrow he can see sunsets, eat tomatoes, and be *normal*. But all he wants right now is to return to that damning confinement, as he craves for that steady innocent hope that has kept him alive (*someone is waiting for me*), than to experience this desolate abandonment.

He will never know if it is raining because he feels warm drops on his face even if the sky is clear, all alone with the ecstatic, fortunate pilgrims who are finally united once more.

(clear autumn skies, they are very rare, *sakura giggles*. good omens. it'll be a nice day)

The shadow of familiar crosses stretches on his gaunt, ashen face.

Sasuke.

His name feels warm on his nape.

His thoughts (*her words*) are now mercifully silent as the sun finally sets.

Sorry

White is the color of a clean slate.

Hour 1

Everything around him was white. But it wasn't the kind of whiteness that was bright, shining, and almost blinding, not at all. But it wasn't subdued either. It was somewhere in between.

There wasn't a plant or animal in sight, nor were there sounds to indicate their own presence. The landscape, if it could even be called that, was bleak, barren, desolate... empty. But the void, encompassing as it was, wasn't unpleasant at all.

No, it wasn't unpleasant but it wasn't particularly pleasant either.

The climate, like all the other aspects of the place, was regulated to the point that it was nonexistent—it wasn't hot, nor was it humid, and it surely wasn't cold either. There wasn't even any wind, and he wasn't sure if there was air and if he was still breathing it.

There were no colors, just the lack of it—everything was white.





There was nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to feel—the lack of everything. *Nothingness. Nihil. Nil.*



In fact, if there was one word that could describe the whole place, it would be ‘empty’.

Empty, if it wasn’t for the long, straight line of souls which spanned to as far as he could see on both ends.

It was annoying, really. If he had any choice, he wouldn’t have dared a queue as monstrous such as *this*. But as it was, there really wasn’t much he could do but join the long column of waiting people; it wasn’t like there was anywhere else to go, anyway.

Nowhere else to go but forward.

There’s up and down, of course, but he didn’t want to think about that.

Not yet, anyway.

Besides, he had come to understand that if he was to go in any of those other directions, he had to wait patiently for his turn first.

Again, not that he was in a hurry—

He was drawn from his musings when, as if on cue, the line moved. Having no choice in the matter whatsoever, he too moved along with it. Just as he was taking a step forward though, he felt something snag on the sole of his shoe. If he didn’t stop himself from stepping forward just in time, he probably would’ve stumbled. As it was, he felt *something* soft collide into his back.

“Sorry...”

The voice, undoubtedly feminine, seemed slightly familiar. And if he wasn’t in such an awful mood, he might’ve even looked. But a line this long could make anyone surly, and he sure wasn’t the most patient of people. Not that he wanted the line to end either but—

“Sorry!”

This time, though, he really did stumble. And to make things worse, his nose collided with the back of the person in front of him, who just happened to be wearing a rather dirty-looking sweater. It was at that moment that he discovered that, albeit muted down, odors still existed in this weird place. Pungent and fetid—it was the icing on the cake, the final nail that hit the coffin, the only thing he needed to finally explode. And so it was the owner of the sweater, a middle-aged man who looked as if he was expecting an apology, who got a rather nasty glare instead. Seriously, it was bad enough that he was lining up for something he didn’t want. But this—this was just too much.

He whirled around, intent on unleashing hell on whoever was behind him and to at least scare her enough to keep her at a distance—preferably at a distance where she wouldn’t step on the sole of his shoe every damn time the line moved.

“Watch where you’re going!”



“You don’t have to shout at me, mister, I said I was sorry! And it was an accident, it’s not like I meant to—”

However, his plans were foiled when he felt a finger poking his chest repeatedly. The nerve of the girl, really. Annoyed, he grabbed the girl’s wrist and looked down.

“Stop it, you clumsy, annoying—”

What he didn’t expect to see, though, was a face he hoped never again to see, a face that made him *weak*, a face that was looking at him with such complete awe, just as it used to seven years ago.

And in his abysmally pessimistic mind, he decided that the day just became ten times worse.

He stifled a groan and turned away before she could confirm that it wasn’t just her imagination that she saw her—

“Sasuke-kun?”

Stubbornly, he refused to turn around. This line could go on forever, and he sure as hell didn’t want to spend eternity being annoyed by—

poke.

“Sasuke-kun? Is that really you?” she asked again.

“Sasuke-kuuun...”

poke. poke. poke.

By this time, he was already regretting his rudeness to the one in front of him. He could’ve traded places with that guy if—

“Sasuke-kun?”

poke. poke.

Still, he refused to budge, choosing instead to look straight ahead. Like hell, he wasn’t going to dig his own grave and turn around.

poke.

“Sasuke-kun? Hey... Sasuke-kun!”

poke. poke. poke.

And he would’ve succeeded too, if only he was more tolerant towards being continuously poked.

It was annoying. *She* was annoying.

“Sakura, stop it. You’re being annoying!” But it was only when he said those words that he realized his mistake.



“Ah, so it is you, Sasuke-kun,” she said, smiling cheekily at him, her eyes holding a mischievous glint that was never directed at him until that moment.

poke. poke. poke. poke.

He wondered when and how and why she had shed all that reverence she used to shower him with back when they were children. Because, really, though he hated it back then, he thought it would actually come in handy at that moment—a lot. He couldn’t, after all, have her treating him so... so disrespectfully.

But just one look at her, smiling at him with a disarming smile that was full of confidence, he knew the old Sakura was gone.

And in her place was a stranger... probably an even more annoying one.

poke.

Hour 30

“Sasuke-kun, according to my watch, we’ve been here for thirty hours... there are 24 hours in a day. They said we’d get to the end of the line in a day, Sasuke-kun! Why is it taking too long?”

He tried to ignore her, only to have her tug his sleeve repeatedly as he did so.

“Hn.”

He tried to act nonchalant. But she did have a point. How long was a day in purgatory, anyway? Apparently, it was different from Earth’s 24-hour a day policy. And was a day in purgatory even a constant value? Because, if it was, what happened during the times when the Earth’s population was still low? And what happened when the population became millions? Did the—he didn’t know—angels, or something, adjust the value of a day as they saw fit? So could a day really mean forever? Not that that was a bad thing. He just hated not knowing what time it was, especially after spending his entire life juggling schedules. Following a new time scheme that nobody oriented him with made him rather anxious.

“You can’t pretend it doesn’t bother you, Sasuke-kun. I know you’re itching to rant too.”

Perceptive. In all honesty, he really was tempted to answer her. Ten or so years of being apart apparently made her a much better conversationalist.

Oh, sure, she was always smart. But when they were young, she never did grace him with her wit. Whenever she was with him, she seemed to lose all of that intelligence everyone admired, asking for dates and openly flirting, doing things that were beneath her. She even declared her love for him once, stupidly thinking that everything would be okay, that they would live happily ever after if he only stayed with her.



Not that he doubted her words, of course. He knew her love was genuine, as was her belief that things would work out. But she just didn't know what offering her love to someone like him entailed. It would never work out. Because even if they have the same age, he had felt like he was ten years older than her. It was no surprise either, for she lived a rather sheltered life with her friends and family while he, well, he was just unlucky.

She was smart, yes, but she was ignorant and naïve as well.

She was much too fragile for someone like him.

But apparently, things changed. She grew bolder. And he was no longer treated differently from everyone else. The repeated poking could attest to that. Sakura, for the first time in her life (or death), was gracing him with her wit. In fact, she treated him so much like he treated everyone else back then that he had to wonder—

“Did you get over me?”

The question, unintentional and inappropriate, seemed to daze his companion as she stood there, paralyzed, her mouth agape.

Sasuke, on the other hand, deeply regretted his impulsive query but knew that there was nothing he could do to take it back. So, he decided to just stick it out and wait for her to respond. He fixed her to her spot with a stare, making sure that she couldn't avoid giving an answer.

Before he could wrest an answer from Sakura, however, she was shoved forward roughly.

“Move it, kid.”

Sasuke reached out to steady her, and glared at the person behind her.

“You don't scare me with that glare, boy. I'm already dead, ain't nothing else you can do to hurt me.”

And to that, he had to concede. Getting into a brawl would prove to be rather impractical, not to mention fruitless. He didn't remove his hand from Sakura's shoulder, however, and ushered her a bit closer to him instead.

“Geez, I don't mean ya any harm. Ain't no sense in doing so. The name's Hidan, by the way,” the man said, slicking his silver hair back with his left hand while extending the other out to them.

“We don't care,” Sasuke answered for the both of them, the tone of his voice still blatantly hostile.

Hidan raised both his hands up in a gesture of mock surrender.

“Fine, I won't bother you.”



With that, Sasuke turned around, placing Sakura in front of him, switching their places in the line. He ignored Hidan's derogatory scoff, choosing instead to focus on some point above Sakura's head.

Sakura, whose shock had dissipated, became strangely silent.

If she wanted to pretend that he never asked her the question, then he was perfectly willing to oblige her. He had a feeling that things were easier that way anyway.

Hour 39

"No."

The word, spoken after many hours of silence, filled him with a sense of sick triumph. Her answer was clipped and vague. But he knew perfectly well what she was talking about.

So she never did get over him.

Well, that was nice.

Because he never did get over her either.

It was only fair...

...Or unfair. After all, he was the one who left her. Not to mention how rude he acted towards her when they were young. She never gave up on him, though. She kept on chasing him, even though she was under the impression that he hated her. He didn't hate her, not really. He just made it seem that way, because he knew that he'd leave eventually.

But she was persistent. She gave him care and love and all of the things he had lost in that one unfortunate incident during his childhood. She gave him her heart when he had lost his. She kept on giving and giving and giving, hoping that she would earn his affections.

And unknown to this oblivious woman, she *did* earn it.

Sakura *had* him; hook, line, and sinker.

It wasn't that he loved her, no. He was Sasuke, he no longer knew how to love.

It was more like, he *needed* her.

She never knew though, nor would he tell her. So she kept on giving, and he never gave back.

She gave, he took, and the world never gave them a chance.



But even when he was away, he still took from her. Her memory was his sanity, the only proof that he once had a life, that there was someone who loved him and that he had someone to go to if he ever decided to stop and rest. As long as she loved him, she was his. He had something, someone. And that if she ever moved on was his biggest fear, because then he would really have nothing left.

Deep in his heart though, he understood that it would be the right thing for her to do so. He never deserved her. Never. But he knew he'd hate her if she did move on, irrational and selfish as it may seem. He'd think of her as a traitor, even when the one who deserved to be called that was no one else but himself.

So he clung to it, the knowledge that someone somewhere was thinking of him, waiting for him, loving him. He believed in it, avoided anything that might prove it wrong, thought of it as true despite the implausibility.

He was right.

"I never did."

She sounded despondent and defeated, well, it didn't matter. Old habits die hard... he learned long ago to appreciate what he could have. Life was a matter of taking what you could and holding on to what you have. And if he still had her heart, then it would be enough. Never mind if it was reluctant and morose.

He smirked.

"Good."

He spoke the words in the same way one would when complimenting a student. And hearing her mumbled complaints afterwards only made him smirk wider.

The line moved, and with feet that suddenly seemed heavier, he moved along with it.

Hour 40

"I wonder how much longer it will take." He heard her say, impatience palpable in her voice. "Why are you so excited anyway?" he asked, one brow raised. He'd have thought everybody would be nervous on the eve of the final judgment. It just wasn't normal to be... excited.

As a response, Sakura gestured at her coat, which he just noticed to be that of a doctor's.

"Just because you're a doctor doesn't mean you've got a sure ticket to heaven," he said, indignant at her cocky confidence. It didn't help at all that she was so optimistic about something he was pessimistic about.



“Oh but Sasuke-kun, I went pro-bono,” she said cheekily, “not that it matters much, anyway. God is said to be merciful, you’ll see. So, many people will be able to make it into heaven even if they haven’t been particularly ‘perfect’. I guess he forgives anyone as long as they didn’t do any *major* sins.”

The moment those words flew out of her mouth, Sasuke felt his stomach drop. For a moment, he felt a deep resentment for Sakura. She was ‘little miss perfect’ when they were children, and as far as he knew, she didn’t change one bit.

Nobody liked know-it-alls.

But *he* did.

What others hated about her was always what he loved about her. And even as he looked at her, standing with a smug grin on her face as she held her white coat, his resentment gave way to some deep admiration. A pro-bono doctor, now that was *something*. He always could count on her to be better than the rest.

Contrary to her belief, it wasn’t her forehead that garnered all the hatred of her classmates. No, it wasn’t even that large to begin with. The reason was Sakura’s tendency to be always a step ahead. She wasn’t prone to making the same mistakes they did. She seemed rather immune to the folly of childhood; always being prim and proper, hand always the first to be raised for recitation, homework always done and always perfect, projects always stellar and always on time, uniform always immaculate. Her only flaw was that underneath all her bravado, she really had little confidence in herself. And all the things she did to improve herself was actually the product of that deep-seated insecurity. Compensation was her bosom buddy.

And that insecurity only grew as more people started teasing her. It was a huge irony, really, that the only thing her enemies had succeeded in doing was making Sakura a winner and themselves losers. Her enemies pushed her into perfection.

But *he* pushed her into imperfection.

The only moment in her life that she had failed him and fallen to mediocrity was when she ‘fell in love’ with him. She pined for him like everyone else. He supposed it should’ve made him feel special. But he knew her, perhaps better than anyone else. And he knew that all her chasing and stalking was never really about him. It was about her rivalry with Ino.

It made him feel used.

It was only later, much later, when she found out that life wasn’t all peaches and cream, that ‘*it*’ became ‘*about him*’. But by then, he had long since fallen for her, albeit reluctantly. This made him resent her, making him excessively rude towards her.

“Feh! You’re a fool,” he snapped, completely meaning it, but not in the way she would’ve thought. By the look on her face, she seemed to be waiting for him to expound on his insult. And when she saw that he wasn’t about to indulge her, she just started chattering about another subject.



Perhaps she *had* shed her insecurities while he was away and the opinions of others, *him* in particular, didn't matter as much to her anymore. Funny how he didn't like how she came closer to perfection for it.

Hour 126

He had long since lost track of how much time they had spent in purgatory and Sakura's wristwatch had long since stopped working. As it was, they were trudging through, feeling not an ounce of tiredness, but a whole lot of boredom, and Sakura's incessant talking wasn't helping at all. It only made him feel like there was a bee buzzing in his ear.

"...and then the second guy said, 'Are you crazy? You'll'—ahh, Sasuke-kun, are you still listening?"

"No."

"Ah, you're no fun," said Sakura, a small pout adorning her face. She never did like it when he ignored her. "Anyway, if you don't want to listen to my stories, then maybe you can think of something to pass the time, Mr. Genius. 'cuz I'm certainly out of ideas," she finished with a huff, her arms crossed in front her.

"How about we actually try *silence* for once, hm?"

In response, Sakura merely huffed once more and turned further away from him. So she was angry, so what? She never could stay mad at—

"Hey, do you remember that time when—"

Sasuke stared at her pointedly. Sure he expected her to forgive him, but not *that* fast. He thought it would buy him at least a few minutes of silence.

"Mooouuu... I'm just bored, Sasuke-kun. Can't you indulge me? I mean, look at this place, it's different from the world we used to live in. We don't even have any notion of what time means here. We have no responsibilities at all, nothing to do but wait. Honestly, I'm not even sure if there really was a past and if there really is a future. For all we know, this line, this could go on forever. And what we thought to be our past was only a dream and I—I just don't know, Sasuke-kun. Honestly, I'm a bit scared."

Her words, rambling though they may have been, actually struck a cord within him. He had never thought of it that way. True, this world, for all its monotonous stability, was virtually alien to him and he was therefore quite uncertain. One thing he was sure about, though, was that this white-washed world—purgatory—was certainly a lot better than the one he had left.

On earth, there had been nothing for him but grief and misery. All he had was a lifetime of turmoil, wrong-turns, terrible luck, personal demons...



In purgatory, however, he had nothing, nothing at all, but Sakura's nonstop babbling.

He had no responsibilities here, no duties, no revenge plots to carry out; he had nothing to do but follow the line.

Perhaps it was a place where he could finally let go...

And then, as if he had a sudden epiphany, it hit him: *maybe he should*.

"When what?"

"Wha—huh?" Sakura asked, confusion written all over her face.

"You asked me if I remembered 'that time'. What about it?"

Inwardly, he sighed contentedly. She always did look pretty when she smiled.

Hour 140

He had never been good at conversations. As a kid, he was trained never to speak until spoken to. And as an adolescent, he mostly avoided talking to people at all. And having an extreme distaste for people didn't help much, either.

It was only now when he was actually swapping inane ideas with Sakura without any pressure and without the guilt of dallying when there was always something else to do that he actually found the merits of interacting with another human being.

It was sort of fun.

"The cure for cancer and the cure for AIDS— just another decade of research and humans would've discovered it—"

"Space exploration—that would've been the next focus. Who cares about cancer or AIDS? Given another thirty years, humans would've sent probes or maybe even primates as far as Alpha Centauri and we would have been zooming through the solar system in high-tech space ships, having already colonized Io."

He moved his palm around in a rough imitation of a space ship, suddenly feeling like a kid again, loving the look of sheer fondness on Sakura's face. She looked as if she was falling in love all over again, falling for this side of him that she had never seen before, a side which was hidden long before he had met her or Naruto or Kakashi. He couldn't even remember the last time he acted this goofy or even the last time he merely thought about outer space, which was his obsession during his childhood.

He had wanted to be an astronaut.

The grim reality of how much had been taken from him because of that one unfortunate incident came crashing down on him in the form of the ease by which he now



held himself, and the sense of freedom which simply saying things like ‘spaceship’ and ‘Io’ granted him.

Being happy was *painful*.

Sakura frowned in concern, noticing his change of mood.

“Space travel is so... ugh... I still think cures, vaccines, for the deadliest diseases would’ve been focused on,” Sakura said tentatively, her argumentative tone sounding a bit forced.

Sasuke’s throat felt constricted and he felt like lashing out, resenting her for all the things she had that she probably took for granted, unjustly hating her for the same reason he had during those wobbly first stages of their friendship. But the feel of her small hand taking hold of his, silently giving him comfort, it couldn’t make him *hate*.

“Spaceships are way cooler than vaccines, Sakura,” he said, his voice a bit strained. It was difficult to speak, but he managed. And that simple statement...that small step...

It felt like a giant leap for him.

He was mending.

Hour 155

His visual acuity was always a perfect 20/20; he could always see farther than anybody he knew. The uncanny ability even earned him the nickname ‘eagle’ during his stay with the—no, he promised himself he wouldn’t think of that. He wouldn’t. Not here. Not anymore.

“—then Hinata actually whacked him on the head with a ladle. Can you imagine poor Naruto’s surprise when he faced the normally shy Hinata’s wrath? That was quite a sight and—Sasuke-kun...”

He tore his gaze away from the structure that loomed ominously in the distance and looked at Sakura. The sight of her, with her head cocked to the side, a contemplative expression gracing her face, drained him of the sense of foreboding he felt when he saw the structure.

He wouldn’t worry... not yet.

He’d give himself a chance first.



Hour 182

“Sakura, I never knew you wanted to be a doctor.”

She turned towards him then, seemingly surprised that he had asked her a question, a question about *her*, no less.

It was unnerving. After all, it was always her who initiated the conversations. The times when he did actually talk to her first were when he needed to ask a question relevant to school, or when he needed something from her. So this—this was relatively new.

And it annoyed him.

Because the way she was looking at him—as if he had grown a second head—was insulting.

Had he really been that much of an ass? Probably.

Either way, he was already trying his best, and the least she could do was cooperate.

“I said, I never knew that you wanted to be a doctor,” he repeated, unable to conceal a hint of irritation in his voice. He expected her to go on another self-righteous speech about helping people and going pro-bono and saving third world countries and such. He wasn’t exactly looking forward to it, but he didn’t know what else to ask her in order to jumpstart a conversation. He was, after all, relatively new to being social.

“I didn’t,” she answered offhandedly.

His eyes widened at her reply. He never expected her to be so blunt. And he hadn’t expected an answer like that either. He watched her as she fiddled with the collar of her coat, her expression pensive. She was biting her lip—a sure indication that she was thinking of something serious.

He waited for her to elaborate, but when she didn’t seem inclined to do so, he pressed.

“Why?”

The look on her face clearly meant that he didn’t wish for him to continue his interrogation. For a moment, he wondered if he should just oblige her and change the topic. She was obviously uncomfortable.

Unfortunately, her discomfort only served to make him more curious.

And he was no martyr.

“Why?” he repeated.

“What has gotten into you, Sasuke-kun? Why are you so inquisitive and persistent? Honestly, it’s like you’re the annoying one now an—”



“I wouldn’t be so persistent if you just tell me the answer. Why did you not want to become a doctor?”

“...”

“Tell me.”

“...”

“Sakura—”

“Because I wanted to be something else,” she said with a huff. She glared at a spot on the ground, refusing to meet his eyes.

“What?”

She glared at him then, obviously annoyed at his persistence.

“You’re unbelievable, Sasuke-kun. Can’t you see that I don’t want to answer your questions? And to think I was actually happy that you asked me something. Geez, what a let down. I can’t believe I spent all those years waiting for you to talk. If only I knew how annoying you could be when you actually did talk, I—”

“Sakura, are you hiding something?” He smirked, a little surprised that he actually sounded playful. Then again, he was already *dead*, he supposed that would make changes inevitable. But he had a feeling that he wasn’t really changing, only reverting to what he would’ve been had he been a bit luckier in life.

“I—No! No, of course not! It’s just that—”

“Then answer my question. What was it that you wanted to be?”

She flushed, her cheeks reddening like a ripe tomato. Amused, his smirk only grew wider.

“Answer my question, Sakura.”

A few moments of silence passed before she finally made up her mind. She sighed, resigned. When she spoke, her voice was laced with bitterness.

“A housewife.”

His housewife.

That he was secretly pleased with her answer and its unspoken implications, he’d never tell her—or anyone, for that matter. Hell, he could hardly even admit it to himself.

Hour 208



It took a while for the muscles in his face to relax, to let go of that perpetual scowl. Something told him that the muscles he used for smiling had atrophied—if *that* was in any way possible. But eventually, he managed to do it, even if it was only a garbled version.

Either way, it was the happiest he'd felt in years.

It was ironic, but being with Sakura in Purgatory brought a whole new dimension to the term 'better off dead'.

A chance at happiness—that was what she gave him.

It made him wonder what it would've been like had he taken this chance when it was first offered to him, when it wouldn't have been bittersweet... just sweet.

If he had just let go of the demons...

Maybe he could've finished college with her. He could've held her hand and asked her to marry him and she would've said yes. They could've rented an apartment, lived together, grew up together, start a family together. He would've gone home to a sickeningly sweet yet undeniably satisfying domestic scene with her in a frilly pink apron welcoming him home with a kiss; he'd smile at her, not one of the messed-up ones he could make now but a real one, teeth showing and all. And then he'd collapse on an easy chair, dead tired from the day's work, maybe even complain about his co-workers a bit, and she'd massage his temples soothingly, and—

"You know boy, they say the fires of hell are black and that they're never doused, no matter what you do. They just keep on burning and burning, and the pain will never ever end, and every minute you spend in hell will be like dying a thousand deaths."

—and then reality came in the form of Hidan's uncouth drawl and dumped him into a pail of ice cold water. Only, it wouldn't really have been water, would it? It would've been the exact opposite.

Hour 213

"Hey Sasuke-kun..."

"Hm?"

He watched her, one brow raised, as she stared at their intertwined hands nervously.

"Uhm, I noticed that we've been holding hands for quite a while now... uhm..."

Her hold on his hand tightened, and his eyes narrowed into slits as he wondered where she was going with this.



“... Well, uhm, I was thinking... well, in truth, I didn’t want to ask you this because I was afraid that you’d let go if you noticed. I mean, I know how much you hate public displays of affection—not that I’m sure it’s affection, I’m not even sure if you like me—and I don’t want to be assuming but—”

“Sakura, get to the point.”

Her cheeks started reddening and her rambling only became worse. Sasuke had to keep himself from sighing in exasperation. He could tell that whatever she was about to say meant a lot to her.

“Well, I... uhm, I’m sorry. Okay, I just think... our hands...”

“Sakura—”

“Oh... right, sorry. It’s just... I—a”

Remembering Naruto’s surprisingly sensible advice about dealing with girls, he squeezed her hand in encouragement. Instead of being grateful though, as he expected, Sakura only looked at him as if he had *really* grown a *third* head. Thoroughly insulted, he growled and tried to tug his hand away. Sakura wouldn’t let him, however, and held on to him with both hands, resolution evident in her eyes.

“Sasuke-kun.”

Oh well, being ‘considerate and romantic’ didn’t work the way he expected it to, but at least it got the job done.

“I’ve noticed that we’ve been holding hands consistently for quite a while now. Does this mean that we’re ‘together’ now...?”

He blinked.

Once.

“I mean, boyfriend-girlfriend *together*?”

Twice.

That was not what he had expected.

It was a rather stupid question too. Wasn’t the answer already obvious?

He looked at Sakura again, wondering whether or not she really was serious, a derisive comment already at the tip of his tongue. But with only one look, he knew she was serious about this. She really needed to know. The thought both amused him and made him feel guilty.

“Do you want us to be?” he asked.

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, she looked very surprised. She looked down at their hands again, seemingly afraid to meet his eyes now. Her grip had slackened... and he didn’t like it.



She didn't give her answer at once.

He couldn't deny that in his heart, he too was starting to become insecure.

He suddenly felt very angry at himself for letting his guard down. Would she deny him? No, she still loved him... he knew that, he trusted her, she wouldn't hurt him, would she? But then, why wasn't she speaking, was she having doubts? Did she realize that she didn't love him after all?

Hating the uncertainty, he pressed.

"Sakura..."

"Sasuke-kun... I—yes, I want us to be together... that is... if you'll have me."

This time, it was his turn to be surprised. He didn't know that she still had those insecurities. Besides, if there was anyone who should feel inadequate and undeserving here, it was him.

"Good," he said, letting go of the breath he didn't know he was holding.

"Good," he repeated.

She beamed at him and he couldn't help but feel painfully undeserving of her gratitude.

"But... Sasuke-kun, you do realize that we're dead, right? So... in a sense, is it really possible be 'together' when we're technically both corpses... and will it be necrophilia if we—"

"Sakura."

"Yes, Sasuke-kun?"

"Shut up."

"Make me?"

"I'll let go of your hand."

"Dolt. You were supposed to make me shut up by kissing me."

He raised a brow at her and pretended to pull his hand away, but she caught it before he could do so completely, and held on to it so tightly it almost hurt.

"Alright, alright, I'm shutting up, geez."

Then she smiled at him, so dazzling and loving and *grateful* that it made his stomach churn and his gut twist. He didn't deserve her at all.

Hour 266



He remembered nights, several nights, when he would just sit on the floor, cradling the bitter memories in his head, making sure he never ever forgot, making sure he wouldn't smile.

Smiling was dangerous. It meant contentment. And he shouldn't be content, not while his family's murderer was still running free. No, he had to wallow in his misery. He had to. He needed to.

So, he kept on reminding himself of the pain—reliving the memories, over and over again, reveling in his solitude, making a special effort to push everyone away. He knew he'd lose sight of his goal if he didn't. Time dulled everything, after all, even the pain of losing a family. And having a make-shift family only served to hasten the salving.

So he pushed them away, all those who offered, he pushed them away with harsh glares and cruel words.

His strategy worked well enough with most people.

But some were persistent.

Eventually, he found himself a potential *mentor*, a potential *best friend*, and a potential *wife*—the makeshift family he was dreading.

He only had to reach out and they would be his.

He never did reach out.

But with them, he didn't have to.

So when his memory of that unfortunate night became hazier and hazier to the point that he had to remind himself every single night of how much it *hurt*, when he started catching himself letting out a small smile all too often, when he got into thinking about building a new future and just *letting* go, he started getting scared.

He needed to keep his focus, he had to avenge his *true* family.

But how could he when all his bad memories were so old and his new ones were all sunshine and rainbows?

He was always smart, so the answer, plain as day, came to him soon enough.

He needed new memories... new sources of pain, new reasons to hate.

He needed them if he wanted to reach his goal. So he left. He left 'study dates on Friday nights', and 'lunches at Ichiraku', and 'philosophical debates and beer'. He left love and friendship and his last shot at happiness.

He left them all behind, he left Naruto, he left Kakashi... he left her, Sakura.

He never needed any more reminding after that.

Though, he had to admit, his plan worked quite well. Maybe even too well.



Everything, everything needed for his revenge anyway, became rather easy. Murder, maiming, kidnapping—*everything* became easy.

These acts became just as mundane as... well, taking a bath or using the johns.

In fact, he got so good at it that he rose in the ranks of the criminal underground with relative speed and ease. It was only a matter of time until he found Itachi.

However, as it turned out, Itachi wasn't really the culprit, after all.

It was like a poorly written plot twist, only worse, because it was *real*.

But revenge was like a drug, he *had* to have it. So he pursued it, relentlessly and with as much zest as before, maybe even more: thus, his little alliance with the Akatsuki, a rebel group that was hell-bent on overthrowing the government.

And with the joint efforts of Madara and Sasuke, Akatsuki's little skirmishes and raids soon turned what used to be a small insurrection into a full-blown civil war.

A civil war which caused the deaths of thousands and thousands of innocent civilians.

Oh yes, the government was going down, and it was *all because of him*, Uchiha Sasuke.

Use the principle of transitivity and you'll have this: thousands and thousands of innocent civilians died because of Uchiha Sasuke.

But it didn't matter, not really, not to him. He was a man with a mission. He had to have his revenge.

Then one day, the world ended.

They were going to do a bombing that day, one that would trigger a series of events that would render them, the Akatsuki, victorious. "Trip the light fantastic," Pain had said in that eerily fanatical voice of his as they watched Deidara press the button.

The bomb exploded properly, exactly according to plan.

What they didn't count on, however, was that there would be a far bigger explosion, one that made their little act of terrorism seem like a puny joke.

Their story didn't even make it to the 6 o'clock news.

How could it when the TV station had turned into a pile of rubble, just like the rest of the city?

Osaka had been hit by a meteor.

The apocalypse had started.

The red sky and the ocean of blood—they came alive, and every other living thing succumbed to the shadow of death.



It was the biggest massacre since the holocaust. And the entire human race fell as its victim.

Sasuke, ever the cynic, believed that the afterlife was a hoax. For him, it was just something people believed in so that their lives would have some small semblance of meaning. He believed that the Bible belonged in the Fiction section of the library, along with the works of Tolkien and Asimov. The idea that an old man, who sported a long snowy beard and wore a pristine white robe, had the power to cast him into the fire or to promise him a blissful eternity was, to him, totally absurd.

Of course, he was promptly proven wrong when he woke up in Purgatory.

And so here he was, holding the hand of the girl he had left all those years ago, very much in-love and hating every minute of it, staring at the tall gates which held what would be his own undoing—an old man who sported a long snowy beard and wore a pristine white robe.

“Sasuke-kun, the Gates of Heaven look rather pretty, don’t they?”

He didn’t answer her. After all, how could he tell her that the Gates of Heaven looked too much like a garrison for him?

Hour 278

“Oi, you.”

poke.

Seriously, what was it with poking and the people in purgatory? Did he have a sign on his back that said ‘poke me’ or was he just perfectly poke-able?

“Oi, I’m talking to you.”

“What!”

The man, Hidan, gestured to him furtively, inviting him to listen to gossip. Reluctantly, Sasuke leaned in. Hidan then cupped his hands and whispered into Sasuke’s ear.

“You’re selfish.”

Sasuke grimaced, thoroughly annoyed. He wasn’t in the mood for any petty squabbles. Sighing, he straightened up and glared at Hidan.

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he said, turning away once again, determined to just ignore the insult and go on with his life—or rather, afterlife.

“I know that you were in Akatsuki, and if you don’t want me to tell her, I suggest you be nicer to me.”



He stiffened, unsure of what to do.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lied.

The man simply laughed at him. “Don’t bother lying, boy, I was in Akatsuki once too. I know where you’re going—in fact, I think we’ll be going there together. Though, from what I gather, *she* doesn’t know that yet.”

“What do you want?”

“Nothing. Besides, it’s not like you have anything to give me... Well, except perhaps your soul, but now that I know that I picked the wrong religion, I don’t think it matters to me anymore... so yeah, you don’t have anything to give me.”

Sasuke gave the man a derisive look. This unexpected development was beginning to make him uneasy. He glanced at Sakura furtively, just to make sure she wasn’t listening. She was engaged in a conversation with the guy he bumped into earlier who, as it turned out, was actually a doctor as well. Satisfied, he turned to Hidan once again.

“Then why are you doing this?” he asked, unable to stop himself from voicing the question out. It was unthinkable—that bad luck would follow him even as he pursued his last taste of happiness.

“I don’t like you.”

The incredulity of what was happening struck him speechless, and he just gawked at Hidan with disbelief written all over his features. Hidan took this as a sign to continue.

“You’re very stupid, you’re setting yourself up for a tragedy and you know it.”

Sasuke gritted his teeth, knowing that what Hidan spoke was true, yet not wanting to acknowledge it.

“...And you’re taking her with you.”

He didn’t have anything to say to that... so, he didn’t.

So what if he was selfish? He was going to hell anyway, what difference would a few more sins make? He was only trying to get as much happiness as he could. After all, he had been so deprived of it when he was on Earth, and it looked like he’d be deprived of it again on the place where he was going. It was only in purgatory that he could actually be happy.

After all, drowning men would always take one last greedy gulp of air before succumbing to the deep blue.

He’d take what he could.

It was only practical.

Although, was it really fair to pull others down for that one last gulp?



Some small part of him was telling him that it was his own fault that he wasn't happy on Earth. He could've had it, he only had to reach out, but he never ever did. So would it really be fair?

Hell, who was he kidding? He killed men for even less. So what if he was setting Sakura up for a tragedy as well? If her tears were what he needed for that last gulp, then he'd milk her eyes for what they're worth.

He didn't love her anyway. He was Sasuke, he no longer knew how to love.

"I don't love her."

Hour 365

"Sasuke-kun, you're being unusually quiet... or rather, you were being unusually talkative, and now you're back to normal."

He heard her giggle, a futile attempt to lighten the mood.

He didn't want to laugh, he *couldn't*.

She was up next.

"Sasuke-kun, you're nervous, aren't you?"

"Hn."

He didn't answer her, he was too busy hating her for the simple fact that she'd leave him. But it wasn't her fault—when was it ever?

It was always him, him, *him*.

"I-I'm nervous too, Sasuke-kun. Hey, talk to me..."

He suddenly wished that he didn't trade places with her earlier. He would've had an easier time walking away from her—he was used to it, after all, walking away. But now he had to watch her, he had to watch her walk away from *him*.

But would she leave him, would she still walk away if she knew that he wouldn't follow? The selfish side of him wanted to find out... and it was the side that was winning.

"Next," a voice called from the gates of the fortress.

"Sasuke-kun, they're calling me now, I'll—I'll see you on the other side, okay?"

Again, he didn't answer her, didn't even look at her. He never lied to her before, and he wasn't about to start.

"Sasuke-kun... I—I have to go..." She tugged on his hand, trying and failing to get his attention.



“Next,” the voice repeated, an impatient air to its tone.

“I’ll—I’ll see you, okay? Love you, Sasuke-kun.”

She waited for him a bit, but pulled her hand free, gave him a small hug, and turned away when the voice called once more.

Sasuke immediately felt the loss, his own hand empty and desolate, growing colder as she walked farther away. He’d miss her warmth—he’d miss her, he’d miss her so much.

He should’ve returned the hug, he should’ve...

“Sakura—”

He called, his voice cracking. He’d tell her...

He’d tell her and she’d know that he wouldn’t be able to follow and she’d stop and stay with him and he wouldn’t be alone, he’d drag her down with him, he didn’t, he didn’t need to be alone anymore, she would, she would go with him if he asked, she loved him, she’d go to hell for him, she—

She looked at him, eyes questioning and expectant and *warm*.

God, he’d never see those eyes again, never see her again, never... *never*.

Unless, he stopped her.

He would. He would because he craved to...

Yes, yes, he knew she would suffer and she deserved *so much better*, but she would suffer, *choose* to suffer if he asked her to.

‘*Stay with me*,’ he’d ask her, and she would.

He didn’t love her anyway, he didn’t love her, but he needed her. He’d take heaven away from her. He’d take her with him.

He *just* needed to ask—

“Thank you.”

Goodbye.

He clenched his fist, trying to keep as much of her warmth as possible. He looked at her, desperately, longingly, trying to imprint the last memory he’d have of her into his mind.

He’d need it for the eternity to come—the memory of Sakura, smiling at him.

A warm, warm Sakura, smiling at him, *loving* him...

And he’d never see her again. Never.

“I’ll see you, Sasuke-kun.”



Sorry, Sakura. Sorry.

God, it hurt.

He closed his eyes, not wanting to watch her walk away, trying to see her last smile in his mind's eye. His throat felt parched, and his heart was clenching painfully, and he even suspected that he was crying—he couldn't even remember the last time he cried—and it was shameful, but he didn't care.

It hurt so much...

He smiled, smiled through the tears and the pain, he smiled.

Goodbye.

The line moved.

She watched as another soul flitted into paradise—a small girl gasping at the sheer magnificence of the misty citadel that lay in wait beyond the gargantuan gates.

Paradise probably was a beautiful place.

But she wouldn't know. After all, she never bothered to really look.

She never did bother to enter the gates.

"Aren't you going to come in?"

An old man sitting behind a massive oak desk asked her.

He was packing up, she noticed. He capped his ink bottle, pocketed his quill, and closed his voluminous notebook, doing so with a satisfied weariness.

"Isn't there anyone else?"

She asked worriedly.

The old man shook his head sadly, not meeting her gaze, and Sakura felt her heart drop.

He wasn't going to come.

"Oh."

Was all she said.

She moved to the very edge of the precipice, ignoring the mist swirling around her feet. She looked down into the abyss, the black nothingness, and trembled.

"Young lady."

The old man called out to her, concern evident in his voice.



“Hell isn’t a kind place, young lady.”

“I know.”

She answered.

“It isn’t possible to return to heaven once you’ve left.”

Sakura turned and took a long lingering, contemplative look at the majestic citadel behind the gates.

Then she looked at the old man in the eyes, a sad smile adorning her face.

“This isn’t heaven.”

A light breeze caressed her skin as she turned away from what should’ve been her home, her flimsy white gown fluttering as she took a single step forward.

She was falling.

Stillborn Sighs

Those lovely red rockets had found him and were swooping in for a last, fatal kiss.

Sasuke sprinted forward, felt the muddy rumble collapse and twist under his left leg. There was a sudden, sick jerk of the bone shifting, the broken pieces grinding together, and then a splitting ache shot like acid up his skin, spiking.

He swore, toppling to the ground, as the machine gun slammed lung-crushingly into his chest, winding him. Sasuke coughed and spat red, struggled onto his elbows and shoved himself inelegantly forward, while clawing desperately at the rim and tumbling, adrenaline throbbing against the back of his eyes, into the shelter-hole.

Around him, the battleground exploded, acid rain and dirt and wicked rusts of metal tearing across his body. His leg was bursting with a bomb of its own, and pain was the color of absolute black.

He fell into it, shaking.

Someone tapped his shoulder hesitantly. Sasuke stirred, peeled back his eyes, and tried to blink away the blindness. She came carefully into focus, features lovingly familiar, her eyes carrying all the home he needed.

“Oh, good.” Sakura sighed shakily. There were dirty crescent moons under her fingernails. She touched his forehead with her lips, leaving a lipstick mark in blood. He





shifted slightly, trying to shake off the grey skies and the heavy gun Sakura had strapped to her back, just over her nurse's uniform.

"This is your nineteenth, Sasuke." He could feel her smile against his skin. "Just one more to go. Just one more run, and you'll be safe. You'll be an officer."

"Tch," he managed the harsh noise, licking his lips twice. Ragged black crows were circling the sky. He ignored the hand she offered him, though she forced it on him anyways, carefully helping him sit up. His head spun, green blooming in front of his vision.



“Here.” Sakura fumbled awkwardly at her waist, then pushed the cool aluminum lid to his lips, precious, clear water filling his mouth deliciously. He used to drink water like this when he was a child. But then, it had still rained back then. There had still been oceans.

“Can you stand?” Sakura asked. Sasuke nodded slowly, and then pushed the canteen back into her pale hands while hearing the water slosh around inside, shoving down his own selfish longing.

“Don’t waste that stuff,” he berated, and struggled to his feet.

His leg, which had throbbed quietly, suddenly screamed harshly, the agony raw and ripping. He gasped and swore—dizziness returning.

“Oh—” Sakura grabbed him again, bracing him with difficulty until the attack abated. She glanced down at his leg shrewdly. “Don’t step on it. I’ll check that out when we get back to base.”

Not home.

Never home.

“You’ve broken your leg,” she told him. Sasuke frowned, worry lines accentuated and sharp against his young face. He couldn’t have been older than twenty.

“How long will it take to heal?” he asked clinically. His eyes tracked her lithe fingers as they tucked fine pink strands behind her left ear. She made a soft, irritable noise.

“Too long, probably. Six weeks, I’d say.”

He agreed. Too long. His hands were quiet on his lap, but he couldn’t tear his eyes from her hair. Pink. How the hell had she managed to make it into the army without shaving it off?

She came to the edge of his bed; curling her arm around his waist and helping him stand on his good foot, the other dangling gruesomely awkward at the ankle. He leaned carefully away, aware of how fragile her shoulders felt.

“So, what do you want to do?” Sakura asked, bright green eyes trained steadily on his own. “I can amputate it, if you want. You won’t get an infection, but it’ll be hell to walk on, and can potentially take even longer.”

“No,” Sasuke said immediately. He tried to picture himself with a stump of a leg, swinging furiously for balance as he hopped.

“Thought so,” Sakura replied knowingly. She steered him to a low counter, backed against the edge of the flimsy medic’s tent, bottoms wavering. Outside the gritty orange cloth, the carefully cheerful chatter of the camp swelled, sharp voices spiking above their murmured partners.



Sasuke hissed softly, his own pride pushing away his delicate human crutch and doggedly struggling to sit on the counter. She tilted her head to the side, watching, very small under her uniform.

“If I was a good doctor, I’d tell you to keep off that foot and let your crutches do the work.” She pushed back her hair and smiled wryly. “But that would be stupid, wouldn’t it?”

“Just do what you have to,” Sasuke ordered curtly. His nerves felt like someone was methodically peeling them apart and playing a voodoo tune on them.

She let out a breath, “I can brace it. It’s not going to get any better, though, if you put any pressure on it. So try to lay off the field action, if you can. If you run on it, it’s going to hurt like hell, but I’ll make sure it won’t get any worse.”

“Thank you,” Sasuke managed, and gritted his teeth. Everyone knew they had run out of painkillers two months ago.

He managed to make it back to the campsite in an hour, leaning on a crutch intended for a man several inches shorter than him. Sakura followed him fretfully. He set his teeth.

“You’re allowed to sleep, you know. I’m not going to keel over and die if you shut your eyes.”

She glanced up at him from under her eyelashes. Pink. She had abandoned make-up a while ago. War had proven to be less glamorous than she had imagined. “You do an awfully good job of trying to.”

A couple of men who hunkered down around a camp fire snickered. Sasuke scowled at them, but they paid him no mind. The medals clinked against one another on his chest; tarnished, picked clean from the corpses of their previous owners. Nineteen of them. Just one more to go.

“I’m registering for the battle tomorrow,” he said suddenly. Her arm arrested him, cold gaze freezing him in place.

Sometimes he imagined that he was in love with Sakura. This was not one of them.

“Don’t you dare,” she said quietly, “Give it a week, Sasuke. You can afford to be out of it for a week.”

He could hear his teeth begin to grind. The men had stopped laughing, either because of the tone shift, or because they were out of range for eavesdropping. The crutch plunged into a shallow trench left by a previous attack, and he very nearly fell, the injured ankle snapping as he bumped it. He bit his lip, gnawing under the permanent scab there.



“I want to go home,” he said quietly, “I just want to be promoted so I can leave. My time will be up. We can get out of here.”

Sakura’s lips pressed together, sharp enough to cut his fingers on. She wore her anger cold.

“Every time you go out there,” she said softly, “I wonder if this is the time you won’t come back. Don’t do this, Sasuke. Not tomorrow. Please.”

He had never been infatuated with her. There had never been the puppy adoration, the excited thrill he got from being near her, the rush of dazed confusion, hormonal over dosage.

But there was still something there.

He took her hand and didn’t say anything. He knew she wouldn’t drop it, half expected her to anyways.

She didn’t. But her grip was bone-shatteringly desperate.

He opened his eyes to an angel for the second time that day. It was the same one.

In the moonlight, the tips of her hair turned silver. Her head was bowed, eyes clenched shut.

He watched how the light curved white and burning over her shoulder, bleaching her into a portrait. She looked eerily beautiful—drowned and blue in her wedding dress.

She was whispering, soft hisses slipping inaudibly together. The sheets pooled into harsh lines around her waist, cold shadows dripping from her shoulder blades.

He sat up carefully, and reached across the space between them, her skin cool, veins warm. His hand cradled the back of her neck, and he drew her back towards him.

He imagined the broken wings, hanging ruined from her shoulders. Her shoulder blades were bare of the things he had imagined, but the imagination insisted.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, the skin in her neck stretched and crinkling. He mouthed the word, reluctant to ruin the secret silence.

What?

She raised her voice, just slightly.

“The enemy fire will not harm Sasuke Uchiha. The enemy fire will not harm Sasuke Uchiha. The enemy fire will not harm Sasuke Uchiha. The—”



“—enemy fire will not harm Sakura Haruno,” he interrupted. Her eyes widened solemnly. He had the nagging sense that he had said something right. He plunged past it. “What, are you religious suddenly?”

She gleamed.

“If you say something enough times, then maybe it’ll come true.”

He didn’t know what to say to something as blindly stupid as that. His chest felt warm as he lay back down, warm enough that his leg faded into the background.

She came to rest beside him, two people on a cot designed for less than one. Just before she drifted off, her mouth found his own, and he could taste that strange, clear thing on her lips. When her eyes closed, he repeated it into her hair.

“The enemy fire will not harm Sasuke Uchiha.”

So close. They were so close to going home. He just needed to survive this one last mission.

She had not been lying about his leg. He couldn’t have gotten more than three paces before he crumpled, gasping, and kept forwards from then on by a steady crawl.

The flash was all he saw before the ground ripped up inches from his right arm. Sasuke slammed off to the side, millimeters faster than the machine gun bullets, and he felt one of them tear through the webbing between his thumb and index finger, but only a nick. Then he was safely curled behind a small mountain of his own friends, and he came out again, pushing off with his bad leg and even if he couldn’t see, he was shooting, he was—

He kept with the killing, even after the enemy soldier was dead.

The bullets ran out.

Sasuke dropped back down, his breath shaking but hands steady as he wrestled a new gun from a dead man.

Just another mile to go. Just another mile.

He got to his knees and started crawling.

His knees were bleeding sluggishly around the gravel embedded in them. He set his teeth and kept going, eyes stinging. He did not want to shut them. He would not die now. He could *not* die now.

He had promised her. He had promised her on day one, told that red-eyed slip of an underage girl that he was going to make it—told her that if he could survive once, he could do it again. Nineteen times. He had to do it for both of them.



Her hands had been shaking, clamped white-knuckled over her gun. He had to pry it from her, gotten her into a medic's uniform, gotten her safe. She would never have to kill anyone again.

But the five percent of people she wasn't able to save—that five percent was destroying her.

Death didn't become Sakura, he realized, and so he kept coming forward stubbornly, breath ragged.

He was so close. So close.

He was going to go home. He was going to go home.

"The enemy fire will not harm Sasuke Uchiha," he muttered, as he played the weary sniper and kept going through the underbrush. Of course, he had to make sure he wasn't going to bleed to death first.

He was going to go home.

He supposed that she would just have to come with him.

This was one of those times he supposed he was in love with her. It was easier to admit when she wasn't around.

From the corner of his eye, a red flag fluttered proudly in the breeze. Panting, Sasuke struggled upright and lurched towards it, something like joy, or maybe just relief flooding his chest.

Here was the sweet escape.

He crossed the finish line.

The war was over for him. Over head, the clouds that never rained stirred, and he tilted his head towards them from his cradle of security. That was what the war was about, the bloody clouds and the fantasy of rain. He supposed they were fighting for the right to live.

He could almost taste the water Sakura had given him.

He limped to the nearest officer, and held out his hand. "Number twenty."

"Ah," the man said calmly, and held out his hand for a shake. "Going home?"

"Yeah," Sasuke said. He had to work to keep the grin from his face. "I'm taking someone with me."

"Hmm," said the man, a little crease of displeasure taking down his brows. But rules were rules—and considering that for every field mission you went on, you had a fifty percent chance of dying, no one would argue against their rights to leave.

"It's a nurse," Sasuke spoke quickly, "from base 7. You'll be wiring them—what?"



The man's face had abruptly slackened, old eyes cloudy with age and something like pity.

"Base 7?" he repeated slowly. Sasuke nodded jerkily, a quiet horror already growing inside of him.

"It was just—it just got hit," the officer said quietly. "The whole place is just a cigarette scar on the map, kid." After a moment, he clapped Sasuke's arm as if in apology.

Sasuke's head was full of white noise, as everything carefully faded into the distance—all of it held carefully apart from that unmanageable reality.

The medals fell from Sasuke's hand, clinking together like they were weeping.

"So..." the officer prompted the suddenly hollow young man, "Where're we sending you?"

Sasuke continued to stare off into space, as though he hadn't heard the question. Finally, he turned. "What?"

"Where's your home?" The officer sighed.

Sasuke shook his head slightly, turned silently, his medals glinting abandoned in the dirt, a perfect twenty.

"Gone."

He waited for two days for her to miraculously survive—and then went in to identify her body. His shoulders twitched, dog tags clattering. That was her. That was Sakura, cold and dead, her wings ripped off for the autopsy, still on the table.

When he stepped outside, people were screaming. It took him a second to realize that it wasn't out of fear—

It was raining.

Sasuke tilted his face back up to the sky that was finally merciful, water peppering his face with tears. He licked his lips—and suddenly realized what Sakura's kisses had tasted like.

Quietly, he broke.

It is easy to become a war hero when you aren't afraid of dying.

Sometimes the reporters came to him, shoving microphones underneath their savior's nose and jabbering in high, fluttering voices, "Do you ever have trouble sleeping at night?"



No.

“Do you know what you’ll do in the future?”

No.

“Do you have any war buddies you keep in touch with?”

No.

“Are you happy, Mr. Uchiha? Now that all of this is over?”

Sasuke hesitated a second too long, then looked straight at the camera, his voice steady.

“Yes. I’m very happy.”

If you say something enough times, it might come true.

It almost never stopped raining now—flooding the barren earth, threatening the world in a different way. Sasuke stood on the street corner as it beat down on him, eyes closed and skin as cold as marble as he leaned into the rain.

The Endymion Effect

2. Time: 0 (reference point)

In what would traditionally be considered the cockpit, there was a skylight that showed the sky as it would have appeared on terra firma. It was a pathetic excuse of a night light, a spaceman’s version of Blankie or Teddy, meant to give comfort to the team of engineers manning the cabin. Personally, he’d prefer something less delusional, as no way in hell could anybody mistake it for a real window.

They were seated at the heart of the gargantuan ship, an amalgam of carbon and alloys, specifically designed over decades to withstand extremes in pressure and temperature. No translucent material had such properties, even in these times, and nobody would want to see outside, anyway, no one who knew what it looked like in actuality. None of the constellations would look familiar, would slowly and continually change as the craft drifted aimlessly about the distant arms of the galaxy.

“For all of eternity,” had a pompous, fatalistic tone to it that would easily turn off a modern-minded listener, but it was a quite feasible time frame to their exile, no thanks to the highly-developed, compulsively-paranoid technologies of his mother civilization. A black hole or an ill-timed supernova might be their only hope for a swift demise, but see, he wasn’t holding his breath for either.





Inevitably, he found his eyes drifting to the other remaining member of the



Sustenance Team. There was something irritatingly waiflike about her as she pattered on one of the Fat Lady's interfacing panels. A mere gosling tinkering with complicated machines beyond her ken, her white lab coat and her cheap plastic-rimmed spectacles were props to the laughable cosplay. Only . . . that was not so, and mocking her attire, however uncongenial with her physical features, did not alter reality.

He still didn't know why she agreed to take on the job. He had never found it appropriate to ask her and probably never would. She was not the type of person assigned to this sort of project, not with her background and history, not with her rosy idealism and intuitive discernment. Then again, neither was he, albeit for different reasons.

"Have you eaten yet?"

Her voice creaked like an old chair, one of those wooden ones gathering dust in the ADL common room, antiques that were specifically chosen to soften the sparseness of the ship. It felt strangely foreign to hear a human voice amidst the constant hum of the machines that controlled their environmental conditions. If he allowed himself to forget the mechanisms that made the illusion possible, they could easily be in any temperate territory on their home base Daru, fifth planet of the red subgiant Tala.

"Your last meal was at least a day ago," she said absently, frowning at the colorful graph pulled up in front of her.

It took a while for his retort to come, and when it did, it sounded too much like a sigh for his comfort. Sitting around and doing nothing had obviously dulled his tongue, and they both knew it. Not even the fact that she wouldn't have the guts to point that out to him made it less annoying. One mention of his being benign and agreeable, any emotional froufrou like that, and he would automatically be anything but.

She was, of course, confident about ferreting out the currents of his "delicate" temper. She would make every effort to keep their interactions calm and civil, believing he would likely ignore her. He let her think what she wanted to think, not due to some perverse enjoyment of busting her bubble at the worst moment.

That was usually just incidental.

"I've been worrying these past few days." That wasn't new—she was eternally worried about one thing or another, be it the oxygen saturation in the combs or the hydrogen levels in the fuel cells. It never failed to amuse him, however, when she referenced time to the Darudin rotation period. Sneering, he closed his eyes against her now still figure. "I'm not anymore," she continued. "I think I'm actually relieved."

He did not answer. He knew she wasn't expecting any, and he was in a mild enough mood to give her what she expected right now. She continued to speak, her voice soft, smoothing into the croon of a mother pacifying an infant. He let her voice wash over him, filtering the words and allowing these to dissipate unprocessed throughout the rest of the chamber.



“... About the last planet being a negative. I have to admit, when I received evidence of water on the extensive polar icecaps of Nu-768, I was ecstatic. I was happy, *alive*, those days the probes were streaming data. Afterwards. . . I really didn’t think I could bear it, no matter how many times I went over the data in retrospect, reasoning to myself that I should have immediately identified the planet as inhospitable after the first few soil and atmospheric samples.”

He felt rather than heard her approach, felt the faint movement of air as she neared and sat beside him. She raised a hand, maybe to run it across his forehead, maybe through his dark hair. She didn’t, but he could sense her skin hovering close, a niggling itch on his forehead. The pads of her fingers would be rough, dry and peeling from the continual hand-washing that was part of her job. She smelled of antiseptic and of the light, flowery smell effusing from her unusual pink hair.

“I had an epiphany,” she said.

He could tell she was prefacing a long and winding monologue.

“In contrast to the conclusions I’ve reached in most of our previous debates, I do care what you think and believe. Maybe, it’s not such a surprising development, considering that indifferent stance you insist on tak—no, you simply live and effuse like contagion, I guess. It’s so intrinsically foreign to my system. I refuse to even consider the reality that somebody, *someone*, truly believes our species irrevocably damned. And that I, possibly, am starting to share your fatalistic views. . .

“It threw me into such a black despair, to such depths I’ve never fathomed existed. Ironically, it came with a sliver of hope that wouldn’t disappear despite the worst scenarios my mind would come up with. It was such an irritating, unbearable thing, that hope, that I had a sudden, humbling insight on how much you must hate me.

“But you. . . a contradiction. . . The signs were very subtle. If I haven’t been exposed to your company for this long, I’d have missed it. *Exempli gratia*, your little walks on the forecastle every other day, you didn’t take at all this week. Your meticulous charting of the constellations visible from the stern you do weekly is overdue. I opened the last ration of ratatouille the 2nd Officer left for us and you didn’t as much as blink. You loved Chouji’s cooking! I can’t believe you would miss it for anything.”

The woman has officially gone bat-shit crazy.

He didn’t take his walks because he didn’t have time, having to fill in the functions of three other people. He didn’t update the starcharts because they’ve practically slowed to a crawl—there was nothing to update. He hated the 2nd Officer’s overly-spiced cooking, but he was the only one who could prepare their very rare vegetables without completely sapping them of nutrients. And there was no conceivable reason why he would want to eat three meals on each of her Darudin day when he wasn’t doing anything that required that much energy.

“You’re disappointed Nu-768 is non-viable,” she said, almost bubbling with a triumph he had not seen in her eyes for years. “Despite your obnoxious declaration that



this mission is the greatest exercise of futility our species has and would ever launch, despite you calling it a very expensive and prolonged euthanasia, you do have hope.

“The Sasuke Uchiha harboring hope, however minimal, is nothing short of cataclysmic. I can’t help it! It’s so maddeningly uplifting that I couldn’t sleep all night. And this morning? I was singing on my way to Decon—I haven’t done that in years! It’s a little mean, I realize, rejoicing over your misery, but. . . I suppose, thanks are in order. So, sincerely—”

He opened his eyes to stare at her, to relay to her how ridiculous he thought her little soliloquy.

(En face.)

She was very near him, the tips of their noses nearly touching. This close, the mysticism of her eternal youth was exposed for the fraud it was—she aged, just like any of her species, destined to wither away into husk, a corruption of her beginning. The corners of her eyes crawled with lines, crow’s claws digging deep into her pale flesh. Her lids were puffy, either from lack of sleep or from crying, likely both.

(They were the color of the ocean when struck by a shaft of sunlight and glowing with a sedate brilliance. The surrounding white widened as she stared back, surprised, the tiny capillaries standing out like red lightning on a preternaturally white sky. Her eyes were like the storms reproducible in primary school learning labs, contained but calamitous when unleashed.)

Her fingers dug deep into his forearm, mirroring the tightening of his grip on her upper arms. He had lunged at her, serpentine in speed and intent. She was so headstrong, so rational, that maybe it would take a sudden stab of adrenaline to get her back to her senses.

“Sasu—!”

“This is exactly that sort of idealistic swill that landed you this dead-end job,” he snarled. “Congratulations, but I can’t say I see that as an asset.”

Her face blanked, stilled—a deer caught unaware or a great cat poised to strike, he could never tell. It doused his sudden fury, the burning recoil granting him clarity. He relinquished her arms and smirked, not missing a single beat even through the millisecond of confusion that came with the realization he was trying to physically break the frail-looking woman in front of him. Appearances could be deceiving. She would fight him tooth and nail, using whatever resentments she bore him—she would have more than ample ammunition. An average human being could and would remember any number of grievances dealt against him in his lifetime. What more of a woman with her cerebral capacity?

“If you’d get off your high horse, Miss Psychotherapist,” he continued, passing off his outburst as an ill-chosen joke. “I’m actually hungry right now. So if you don’t mind my pessimistic company. . .”



“Of course not,” she said smoothly, not a drop of emotion betrayed in her tone. “The Fat Lady made us coq au vin.”

She stood up, removing her lab coat to reveal their standard-issue jump suits.

“Shall we go?”

He was as much a fool as she was.

b. Time: - 5.32x10⁷ seconds (2 years and 93 Darudin days ago)

The standard-issue jump suits were made of a synthetic plastic that was pretty close to indestructible, despite its being skintight, flimsy, and unnervingly gelatinous to touch. It was lined with good-old bacteriostatic cotton that allowed for comfort and less frequent washing, the common kind still mass-produced in the extant Darudin human sanctuaries. She was rather fond of its salmon tint, but only when she wasn't the one sporting it. The color was horrendous against her pale pink hair, which made her hate seeing herself on mirrors, a penchant she thought she had outgrown years ago.

These days saw her less and less attired officially. If there was one condition the uniform was not designed to adapt to, it was her current one. It would have made her look like a stuffed crab escaping from someone's dinner plate, among other things.

She turned thirty-three last week, about a third through the average life span of her species. It was also the optimum age for child-bearing, or so it was according to the consensus reached by the scientific community and the ethico-moral synod in her birthplace. Of course, her birthplace hasn't been around for a while now. Hamlet N37 was a mining outpost on one of Daru's two moons, Nanase, which was abandoned after a sudden increase of seismic activity on its dusty surface. Afterwards, she spent most of her teenage years in one of the few conglomerations of human settlement in Daru, the sole megalopolis left intact, a vast honeycomb of metal and concrete that spread thousands of kilometers underground.

Her mother's simple dusters were relics of her childhood. They were of linen woven and spun by hand from flax harvested from Hamlet N37's greenhouses. Her father, in his spare time, had salvaged an antique fabric-dyeing machine and hooked it up to her mother's workstation, who surprisingly did manage to finish several sewing projects in her free time. These dresses had the vibrant reds and purples, lime greens and tangerines that were characteristic of tropical Darudin housecoats. Instead of the typical floral print, on the one-piece dresses bloomed fractals, limited but beautiful models produced from complicated equations. It perfectly encapsulated her family life; they were all highly involved with frontier science, but at heart, remained homey and uncomplicated. The dusters were bequeathed to her before she left Daru for the mission. They were special items she specifically had to ask permission to carry onboard.



The one she had on was worn and wrinkled, airy and cool against her skin. It was the only plain one she had, bleach-washed into a crisp white. She had only started to show, but the drape and fall of the dress accentuated her curves, rendering her an interesting mix of vulnerability and matronly depth—or so her senior said, a kindly biophysicist in his sixties, whose lost dream was to become a deep-sea fisherman/poet. She did feel young and womanly, she supposed, a departure from the sexless, indomitable authority her salmon uniform carried.

Such freedom was not meant to last. Her eight hours ticked by, and she would need at least five of those spent on sleep to function optimally during her shift. She went back to her reading, a wonderfully languid and unhurried book written in a cheerful, engaging voice. It was a welcomed reprieve from the dry, neutral tone of the academe she used on her copious notes or the terse, shortened jargon she used to communicate with the ship and her crew.

En face, she read, cradling the book on her thighs to be able to copy the model's position on the illustration.

"This enables the mother and child to bond, allowing close, face-to-face contact," she read aloud, a tactic she often used as a student, twenty years ago. "Newborns are not yet able to focus well, but it is a person's face that can stimulate them the most. This early, they start to learn the sight, sounds, and smells of their mother."

Tongue peeping from her slightly open lips, she positioned her arms before her, carefully supporting the head and neck of the imaginary babe she carried. At the corner of one eye, she noticed the ubiquitous salmon standing in front of her, but she did not drop her hands, even as she turned to address her silent audience.

"Ah, you're here," she said enthusiastically. "Come sit and practice with me. Fathers need to bond with their babies, too, don't they? If we have to do even that in shifts, we should have equal capacity for it. Constancy and stability is highly important in a child's psychosocial development, after all."

"Aa," was all he said, and she had to content herself with this. Sakura had a short stint as a commanding officer when she was younger, but it was long enough for her to become used to having her orders repeated back and followed explicitly. Of course, this was a different situation: he wasn't subordinate to her. Still, she expected his utmost cooperation. She could concede the process as being part of the job, but the end-product would not be, was not, simply that. She did not know if her partner agreed to this view, but she was assured by his reputation and work ethics that he would never do anything half-baked.

Sasuke Uchiha was, for all intents and purpose, her mate. They were assigned as a unit to the ship Freja (or Fat Lady, as the crew affectionately called her) with the knowledge that they would be compelled to procreate eventually, as scheduled; they were briefed together, for their fields of expertise supplemented each other well, as did the permutations offered by their genetic material. He accepted it stoically, immediately, while it took Sakura days of reflection before she could agree to the condition, the



“packaged deal.” Eventually, she figured it was one way to experience a refreshingly *normal* stage in life ordinary women went through, one that she would probably only keep putting off. No matter the circumstances. . .

She suspected such a “packaged deal” would inspire deep disapproval from the ethico-moral synod that deeply impacted her childhood. However, as her mission partner had pointed out once, they now existed beyond the scope of any Darudin judiciary body. Darudin laws and values no longer completely apply to them. She wasn’t sure she was prepared to accept this belief as yet, but it was something she tacked to the back of her mind, something to fall upon should her morals be challenged—and be defeated—by dire circumstances.

“It’s done,” he told her.

At first, she thought he was referring to the parenting book, that he had somehow finished reading it during his last break. His expression was unreadable. It wiped away the playful retort forming in her mind, as swiftly as it did away with her smile. She knew exactly what he meant.

“This was done without my consent.”

“It wasn’t yours to give.”

“It wasn’t done with my blessing, either.”

“But it was with your knowledge.”

“So it was,” she conceded unhappily. “Was he comfortable?”

He thought the question irrelevant. There was barely a flicker of change on his face, but she had learned the nuances of his mood to be able to decipher his expressions. The query was impossible to answer, so there really was no point asking it.

“Was it quick?” she asked instead.

“If the expert had conducted the procedure, it might have ran faster.”

“In this case, my expertise is close to nil. I have never induced hibernation. My job is to monitor the physical well-being of our passengers and my training was limited to this. I wasn’t there when all these people began their sleep.”

“The Fat Lady has a detailed tutorial in her memory.”

“As with everything, I’m sure.”

“For one so versed in the mysteries of the Endymion Effect, you’re not too keen on exploiting its properties. Aren’t you one of the people who made such a technology even possible?”

“Has anybody ever faulted the Titan Prometheus for the millennia of wars and strife that made use of his heavenly gift?” she murmured, referring to an obscure mythological figure. “I can’t police what they make of the knowledge I contribute.”



“If you really thought such knowledge had a potential to become dangerous, you should have controlled its dissemination more rigidly.”

Rigid control was something Sasuke Uchiha had grown up with, that much she could tell from his hometown. He hailed from the underwater city of Dis, a former military instillation from decades before the entirety of Daru was brought to a central governance. Subject of countless sociologic case studies, its citizens' lives were regimented out of necessity. Their every action was subject to strict standards, as if the city's existence was as tenuous as a bubble's.

And it was! Virtually everything was centered upon the upkeep of the city: the close nurturing of the semi-organic membrane that kept out the sea water, the precise monitoring of the artificial atmosphere that served as roof against all the weight of the ocean, the exacting rations of all resources (even oxygen consumption, which is why everyone followed a strict schedule of daily activities). It was the ascetic discipline of these myrmidons that kept Dis in existence for almost a century, and when a single element fell out of line, the entire city disappeared overnight. Or so went the story. Sasuke, one of the few survivors, never indulged her with details and likely never would.

“Even if you can't police it,” he continued. “Don't you have some influence over the bureaucratic red tape involved in scientific publication? After all, doesn't discovery, in many ways, confer ownership?”

She shivered at his undecipherable expression. It was in unexpected moments like this that he showed a startlingly possessive side. It needed a complicated knot of emotion in her gut, something she was not prepared to explore as yet. She turned away to avoid his eyes.

“It doesn't really matter, if I'm the only one who recognizes that ownership,” she said. “You know as well I do. We are mere slaves to our own intellect and curiosity. It is the act of discovery that entices us, not the power that lies behind controlling its spread.”

“Your naivete speaking, as usual.”

“Perhaps.”

They were quiet. He continued undressing and changed into more loose-fitting garments, unembarrassed, unperturbed by her presence. She had seen his wiry body unclothed a number of times before. He wasn't unpleasant to look at, but she averted her eyes politely.

“What is it about the process that makes you disapprove?” he asked as he stretched on the wooden-framed bed. “You championed this cause in every pointless discussion we've had about the morality of this mission.”

At another time, she would have brushed his question aside with an equally pointed retort, pointing out that she was merely anxious for their friend, not necessarily



doubtful of the process. But see, she was feeling doubtful, and also, strangely, rawly honest.

"Where do I start?" she asked quietly.

"Your usual obnoxious correction whenever anybody calls it, 'hibernation,' might be significant."

"That 'hibernation' is a misnomer?" She felt unexpectedly vulnerable as she admitted this. "But isn't it? It's not the same as bears hibernating through winter, for example."

"You don't like the other euphemism, either."

"I suppose, 'frozen,' may be more appropriate." She shrugged. "It's still an oversimplification and not entirely accurate. I would still go by Induction, a safe, minimally derivative term."

The general consensus was that matter moved through both space and time; there were thousands of years worth of academic bickering over the niceties and nuances of physical rules that governed this, many of which remain unresolved. The Endymion Effect, as currently understood, appeared to violate many long-standing theories developed by their civilization.

The Fat Lady's passengers were "frozen," in the sense that their movement through time has been suspended, or at least, slowed to a near zero. They were also "frozen," because all of their movement has ceased, down to the subatomic level. One concrete "explanation" used widely to disseminate the concept to the public was, if it were possible to take these people's temperature, it would come out as the absolute zero because there was absolutely no change, no movement of energy. . .

Which was, simply put, impossible.

"Imagine," she continued. "How can there be a state so absolute that everything down to the quarks that make up the atoms of your body are simply suspended and unmoving, without disintegrating into nothingness? Never mind the gazillion postulates it violates! How can you call something, something, without referring to a known syntax? How can you call this organic matter living—or for that matter, matter!—when every biologic process, every chemical reaction, every electromagnetic bond, is defined by interactions in multiple levels, defined by motion. What then are those intangibles supposedly 'frozen' in the 'combs? What then in actuality exists?"

"What is actuality?" he returned, philosophical.

"Indeed. Is a life suspended a life at all? That our technological capabilities could reach this zenith is. . . disturbing. Like standing at a precipice. Like staring down oblivion."

"They've brought someone back."



"Yes, but what if that was by mere chance? What are the long-term consequences? Awakening from the Endymion Effect. . . what are the chances that all of your components would simply just continue doing whatever it was doing before they halted? The whole is greater than its parts—it has been drilled into our systems since birth. A wrong cell undergoing apoptosis, the wrong hydrogen bond breaking, couldn't they lead to something disastrous, couldn't they change something intrinsic, something fundamental to one's being? There are so many things that could go wrong. Could you truly say the test subject survived the procedure unaltered? How would you back that claim? What will be your basis?"

She paused, breathless from her tirade. He stared at her for what felt like an hour. Really, it was mere seconds before his scrutinizing look turned into a sneer.

"If you really believe those hypothetical screw-ups you enjoy making up in your free time, you'd have gone to the 'combs to physically restrain old Sar before he underwent Induction."

She was silent, digesting his accusation and measuring its truth against her soul.

"Do you really like hearing your voice that much?" he asked rather snidely. "Or is it mine you hanker for?"

"Between the two of us, we might discern a voice of reason amidst this hellish din," she quoted from the popular, cataclysmic manifesto of fifty years ago that began the end of their world yet again. "Please, I'm not trying to pick a fight, Sasuke. I just want to have another viewpoint."

"I'll give you a viewpoint: the scenarios posited by your genius mind not withstanding, you want to believe the Endymion Effect. You want to believe that all these people we've been carting around deep space would wake up one day and step into a Utopian world, whole and unchanged. Why should I 'agree' with your dark portents, just so you could disagree with me and dissuade yourself of your own fears? I'm not going to waste my breath on a settled argument."

She sighed at his mocking tone. She stood up from her recliner, her knees buckling as blood circulation reestablished itself on her numbing legs. Shelving her book, she meandered hesitantly towards the bed, smoothing imaginary creases on her dress.

"You'll never be able to one-up me in these mind games," he finished, "so quit while you're ahead."

"Of course, I don't believe it," she whispered, eyes stark and wandering the rough, plain bedspread of the antique bed. "Otherwise, we're just lugging around corpses, biding our time till death."

"Do you know," she continued. "They named the phenomenon after a mythological astronomer, who was loved by the moon goddess. He asked for agelessness and immortality from the king of the gods, and was granted eternal sleep. Sweet Endymion, forever in peaceful repose."



Her voice died into a bleak silence, the same kind, she realized, that has always and pervasively been. When she was about to take her leave, however, to forgo sleep and immerse herself in her routines, he spoke.

"I won't waste my breath on mind games," he repeated. "But I'm willing to put it to other use."

She looked at him blankly, knowing he was telling her something but unable to process his words to divulge a half-hidden meaning.

His dark eyes rolled ever-so-slightly.

"Will you lie with me?" he asked, blunt.

Her unwilling response was swift and violent; she felt the familiar flush raze her entire body in seconds, reflected by his knowing expression. It wasn't the first time he asked, though he didn't usually use words. He always initiated the act, lazily and deliberately coaxing her with his hands, lips, pausing every so often as if waiting for her to balk. She had too much pride and thus never backed down from his challenges, even in these.

(This was another thing that convinced her that Sasuke Uchiha would do a sterling job as father of her child: he refused the less intimate, less embarrassing alternatives, wanting the conception to be done the "natural" way. There was something compelling about the way he seemed to treat conception as something sacred, about discovering there were things he did hold above his cold, seemingly universal disdain of everything. And despite the mocking, superior attitude he sported with everyone, including her, he was always, always, considerate when it came to her physical comfort, as if it was instinct that necessitated he care for her.

It surprised her how much he threw into giving her pleasure. Passion, he most certainly did not lack. It was contained, constricted, rigidly controlled and channeled however it could serve him. Given his devotion to excellence, she supposed it shouldn't be surprising.

Even if it was a little saddening.)

It was not an unpleasant thing to endure, so she agreed and abandoned her salmon-colored uniform for a few more hours.

c. Time: -4.46×10^7 seconds (1 year and 262 Darudin days ago)

About 10,000 years ago, the ancients believed that the universe was structured like a good vegetable stew, with the planets and stars suspended in a medium called ether, the way turnips and potatoes were in a tureen of simmering broth. Later, the concept of ether was replaced by vacuum. Of course, Naught was the preferred term of popular anarchist movements that characterized the previous century. There was a fierce



backlash against deep space exploration and other technological milestones of their multi-fold, millennia-old civilization. At its worst, the Darudins' sporadic rebellions against their intricately structured, highly specialized lives have degraded to unbridled mass hysteria.

It started 1,000 years ago. Deep space exploration had gained a momentum that seemingly hurled humanity headlong unto avenues that strained mankind's resilience and adaptability. Whether to the depths of damnation or the pinnacle of self-actualization, their most brilliant minds teetered on the brink of madness in their quest to reach the stars, to spread the Darudin race to all life-supporting planets in the universe.

Tala, the magnificent white star that was their sun, was deemed precious enough to sacrifice for an entire species' dream. Since they could not duplicate the power of Tala, they instead developed a way to steal it, in keeping with the method of the god of innovation. Prometheus, the mythology went, stole fire from the heavens and gave it as gift to man, forever sundering its blood from the fate of the other beasts.

Massive ships embarked for the distant reaches of the galaxy, powered by the fusion of the sun. They were arks that carried entire cities, self-supporting and self-sustaining, had the capacity to grow their population exponentially, when the time came to settle on a new planet. But there was only so much they could steal from Tala. She was dying, suddenly and obviously, a lingering ember. No one knew how long she would burn before fading away—or worse, exploding. As for those ship-colonies, they were never heard from again.

Until 273 years ago.

Communication came, claiming to come from an expedition team, one of the firsts that preceded the lost ship-colonies. The messages came as a series of verbal recordings sent as compressed pulses of radio waves. Their reported position was at least halfway across the galaxy and the time stamp given was the 54th solstice in the Virgin's sphere, exactly 539 years ago. The recipients were not confined to the skeptical experts constantly watching the nightly skies in their labs and space stations. The messages were heard in nearly every media device used by the general populace.

And the voice of the Singularity shattered the cloud of petty preoccupations that immersed our Sentience in the mundane, meaningless Subsistence.

There was another Tala-like star, the messages claimed, another Daru-like planet, in another solar system. Centuries of cataclysmic climate changes and overt tectonic shifting have drastically altered the face of Daru, as well as the living creatures that populated it. Humanity survived, endured; they did this well, as always. But there was a note of hysteria that echoed in the everyday life of humans, even generations after their world nearly ended, even after the individual people forgot. It took only those voices from the sky for the Darudins to snap, and the note of despair became a lingering scream.

Amidst the various revolts and social upheavals caused by the messages, some of the sturdier, surviving governments continued to explore the possibilities beneath the



cryptic messages that claim visions of an apocalyptic end to the Talan solar system. The Darudins needed to transplant their entire civilization, urged the messages, before Tala devours the whole planetary system. More importantly, other manned expeditions confirmed indirectly the existence of what the messages called “currents,” tracks that enabled one to travel to distances otherwise impossible to reach via a straight line over a manageable period of time, even by near-light-speed. There were many attempts to quantify and qualify these so-called currents, but the results never added up to an answer. The general belief was that they were neither matter or energy. They called it Aether.

Without direct evidence of the currents’ existence, it took decades of observation before scientists could chart possible areas with high concentration of Aether, places that humans could travel to using existing spacecrafts. About seven manned expeditions left over a span of four decades and not a single one returned. Project Orpheus was abandoned for a while and was only revisited lately when a lowly weapons physicist made a strange breakthrough, the infamous Endymion Effect.

One of the ships that was part of the project’s maiden voyage was Freja. Its mission, as were its previous incarnations’, was to settle in a new hospitable planet, with conditions similar enough to Darudin ones that most of her species could adapt and thrive. The difference, of course, was that while the first ship-colonies were launched for an aggressive expansion, Freja and her ilk were a last hope for survival.

Freja carried fifteen thousand individuals, human beings and about three hundred species of other domesticated life forms. They were all kept in a suspended state that slowed their aging to a minuscule crawl. The five thousand, four hundred, and seventy-six people were all volunteers, willing participants in a voyage to nowhere. None of them expected to go back home, and only a very few really expected to see the promised Utopia. It was a leap of faith, a lesser of two evils. The passengers would wait for as long as their ship would endure.

The alternative was to wait in Daru for the eventual death of Tala.

The crew members, of course, were more pragmatic. Called the Sustenance Team, they lived as in any other hostile settlement they have before, mostly in the Talan solar system, previous attempts to outlive the dying sun for as long as they could. They followed strict protocols, similar to those they used to survive in far-flung space stations. If they had strong sentiments about Project Orpheus, they kept it to themselves or their closest colleagues.

An average of seventy people per team, they were expected to produce their own food, recycle various wastes, sustain the ship and her passengers, and expand the human knowledge base. They were also to replenish their ranks, passing down their particular expertise to their offspring. Worse comes to worst, there were already designated experts to awaken from the so-called Endymion Effect.

Of course, the corollary also existed: should a crew member wish to retire, there was a way of inducing the Effect. In fact, the process had already been tried and tested. Old Sar was biophysicist of great renown, formerly based on a now-abandoned



megapolis in the southern pole of Daru. This was his seventh deep space mission, and he was considered by many an expert on what little was known about the currents. His observations during the trip had led him to believe that these currents may be likened to long spidery fissures in the space-time continuum, perhaps encroachments from parallel universes. Old Sar retired before he had fully developed his theories on these space-time fissures. He was diagnosed with malignant tumors in the white matter deep in his brain that would ordinarily be possible to treat. Unfortunately, they did not have the specialized surgical team required to treat him. His only hope was to undergo Induction, and perhaps one day, he would awaken to a world capable of curing him.

The hibernation of Hiruzen Sarutobi was only the first in the ship Freja. Within three months, twenty-seven other members of the Sustenance Team opted to undergo the Induction. Unlike in the famed biophysicist's case, the following ones weren't necessitated by health reasons. If any illnesses were at all involved, they were of the heart.

It was the staff captain, Kabuto Yakushi, who performed the Inductions, first with Old Sar, then with the following staff members. Old Sar's brilliant protege Sakura Haruno would have been the most qualified operator, but she had refused, supposedly for health reasons. Dr. Yakushi followed the detailed module Old Sar himself created so that essentially anybody could induce the Endymion Effect.

Of course, when Dr. Yakushi himself decided to undergo the procedure (ostensibly, to gather empirical data himself) Sakura Haruno was forced by her own conscience to undertake the responsibility. The ship's chief engineer disapproved of this, as Sakura was well within the eight month of her pregnancy at that point and was not the best person to undergo such stress. Evidently, he didn't express this opinion empathically enough. In fact, his mate interpreted his cryptic responses as icy indifference.

Sakura followed the usual procedure. Majority of the ship's baggage was naturally in its hull, and majority of the ship's baggage consisted of people. The 'combs were only accessible via the access pod in the Main Mast, the massive supporting pillar around which most of the Sustenance Team's living spaces were built around. Descending into the bowels of the ship required several preparations, including decontamination. The Decon cabin was the last room before entering the 'combs. The 'combs, as the staff called it, was the meticulously crafted structure that held the thousands of people suspended in the Endymion Effect. It consisted seventy percent of Freja's main body.

Each hibernating individual was housed in a hexagonal prism, not unlike the ornamental fish tanks common in Darudin domiciles. Because the human body was not entirely understood in this suspended state, conditions inside the prisms were made optimum, e.g. its temperature, air pressure, oxygen level were all supportive of life. . . None of these seemed to affect the low-energy state of the subject. It was as if an unquantifiable layer of vacuum existed around them all, was what Dr. Yakushi said, even as he prepared to become one of them.



In the Decon cabin, their entire bodies were coated by a gelatinous substance that provided, theoretically, additional shielding in case of Aether spillage—theoretically, because spillage had never actually happened. The slither of Aether to which the bottom of the ship opened to had always been kept in place by powerful electromagnets and ionized gases. (The same technology was applied to the maintenance of cabin pressure, of gravitational and atmospheric conditions similar to that in Daru, etc.)

The Decon portal opened to a tubular cavity, stretching as far as the human eye could see, its diameter a mere hundred feet. The landing broke off into two narrow walkways, which Sakura traversed when doing her daily inspection of the ‘combs. A drop was in between these hallways, quickly disappearing into a dark void. There was no way of telling whether the bottom of the ship was ajar to let Aether in, not with mere senses. The ‘combs, outside the little hexagonal prisms, were kept cool and minimally lit. Enough phosphorescence came from the prisms to enable safe passage through the walkways.

Dr Yakushi and Major General Haruno stopped just a few strides away from the Decon portal. They stepped up a dais, inches away from plunging into that black abyss. Sakura swayed with sudden vertigo and was carefully steadied by her companion.

The Sustenance Team had always been casual when conversing with the ship—it coined the nickname Fat Lady. The ensuing procedure was neither light or routine, however. Sakura’s manner was formal and detached, while her voice only reached the barest of whispers.

“Freja, please prepare for Induction.”

“Why should I follow you, Sakura Haruno?” came the automated prompt, stylized with ominous gravity.

“Because suicide missions aren’t accomplished by mere death,” she replied, completing the verification process. “We reach for light; it is tangible through will.”

The dais lifted, separating from the rest of the landing, while the two walkways parted and pressed against the walls of prisms on their either side. The subdued light emanating from the transparent chambers flickered, shut, and came back even dimmer.

They exchanged a few words, then he fell back into the darkness. Sakura watched even though she couldn’t see how his body would flow along the darkened trench that ran from the ship’s bow, where they were, to the stern. In a bit, there would be another occupied prism, there would be Dr. Kabuto Yakushi in it, sleeping.

The poignant moment was short-lived. An inexorable force gutted the cavity, a fierce squall slipping through quickly-closing doors, a tongue of flame reaching through an antique furnace’s lips. It was the same force that knocked the ship off its course, slamming it against an asteroid floating by. The massive piece of rock and metal shattered into several pieces, while the ship bounced off it, outwardly unscathed. It hurtled several million miles before being pulled to orbit around an inhospitable gas giant that tottered about the fringes of a two-star system.



Survivors would later theorize that a supernova in another part of the universe sent raw energy through the “currents,” the effect similar to a live wire receiving an upsurge of electricity. Explanations, however, were hard to come by at time of the incident, and would have been unbearably, cursedly useless.

Sakura Haruno blacked out when the unseen energy swept her from where she stood, but it wasn’t because of the forces that nearly tore her to pieces.

She screamed.

Choked.

She jolted back to her senses at the sickening jerk of intense gravitation, Freja’s protective mechanism that pulled her flat against the nearest wall to keep her from bouncing around and damaging the insides of the near-invincible ship. When the ship relinquished her, the horrendous sound of ripping assailed her ears, pushing her down onto the floor this time.

It wasn’t the fusion rockets, she reasoned as soon as she could reason around the petrifying terror, the shock of her colleague’s demise. None of them would be alive if the massive reactor vessels were somehow damaged. Both vessels flanked the ship, separated only by a few feet, where they hovered. They housed and directed the nuclear fusions that propelled the ship when it wasn’t sailing on the currents. Any tiny damage and they would have gone up in a ball of flame, a short-lived, button-hole of a sun that would leave behind a cooling husk a hundred seconds later.

“Freja!” she demanded.

“Damage to the starboard wing. Cephalad fracture in progress.”

The ship was ripping itself apart to keep the internal damage from spreading. It was in the process of removing its wings, where most of the laboratories, the food-growing vivariums, and storage units were housed.

“Bilateral fracture completed.”

The ship had already relinquished the fusion rockets.

“Northeastern and eastern decks are compromised.”

A fourth of the observatory was in danger. Their living spaces were near that area. What if—

“Main Mast is compromised.

“Central Dome is compromised.

“Initiating Cauda-sagittal fractures.”

“No!” Sakura screamed. “Belay that!”

“Acknowledging Team Member’s presence within fracture lines. Fifteen minute delay to allow evacuation. Countdown initiated.”



“Belay Sagittal fracture!”

“Negative. Manual interfacing required for override of Salvaging System.”

The Cauda-sagittal fracture would leave the ship with only, in essence, part of its thorax: the cockpit, the Activities of Daily Living quarters, the formidably-fortified computer that controlled—that *was*—Freja, back-up fuel cells, and the solar sails. All of its baggage would have been relinquished, allowed to float deep into the recesses of space, till they were found or destroyed.

All of them.

Eleven other people had belayed the Cauda-sagittal fracture around the same time. Eight of them knew the locations to establish manual interfacing. Only three had the physical means to access those places. Only one was able to reach the Main Mast. She climbed the three-story height via the ladder fixed against the northern wall of the hull. It connected to the Main Mast through several bridge ladders.

Dr. Shizune arrived in the ‘combs in time to see Chief Engineer Sasuke Uchiha call out instructions as he climbed down the immense pillar called the Main Mast, trying to reach his mate’s side via a different route. He commanded her to wait for him. She started going back down via the Main Mast, anyway, telling her mate who was meters above her that the both of them would not fit in the small alcove that housed the interfacing panel.

“Cauda-sagittal fracture terminated.”

On her way down the Main Mast, Sakura Haruno missed her footing and fell. Ordinarily, the ship’s automatic response would have been to suspend gravity inside the ‘combs and to cushion her fall with several puffs of air. The override, however, was general, and froze Freja from initiating programmed responses for six minutes and fourteen seconds. Well before that time frame ended, Sakura had hit the dais back first, bounced, and flopped onto her belly.

She fractured most of her lumbar spine and her pelvis in three places. She also lacerated her liver and ruptured her uterus. Dr. Shizune attempted a caesarian section in the aseptic Decon chamber, spattering the pristine silver walls with her patient’s blood. Sakura begged to be hibernated but the Chief Engineer overruled her. Whether due to Dr Shizune’s skill and acumen, Chief Uchiha’s mastery of Darudin technologies, or simply fate, Sakura Haruno survived that unfortunate accident. Her child, however, did not.

The Coronal and Bilateral fractures were completed well before Sakura’s complicated surgeries were. Freja abandoned most of her damaged wings, as well as the fusion rockets necessary for it to propel back to an Aether stream, to “the currents.” The damaged parts of what remained of the ship were reparable enough to keep the ship supportive of human life. The surviving engineers were able to staunch Freja’s gaping wounds, while Shizune and several others struggled to piece back Major General Haruno.



63 percent of the Sustenance Team died that day. 24 percent had already opted to hibernate even before the inexplicable incident. Another 10 percent would follow in the next few months.

4 years and 6 months after its launch, Freja, it appeared, had failed her mission under Project Orpheus.

d. Time: 2.84×10^6 (34 Darudin days later)

Before the sweet arias of the courting birds, before the gentle stroke of sunlight across her scrunched-up lids, the first sensation her mind would process was the warmth, not quite touching her, but near enough to emanate deliciously towards her aching back. Call her sentimental, but it was the closest she would ever be to home. The person who provided such a pleasant feeling had no idea—couldn't care less, probably. It was a tiny, fleeting moment of contentment, gone and lost with the next exhalation.

There were no mornings. The Fat Lady coursed ever-so-slowly to a pair of suns, so if one defined morning as a measure of time wherein a certain place faced towards light, then Freja would be in the midst of some daytime marathon. However, that same light did not breach the ship's walls in its visible form. The soft white-yellow ambience that graced the room was a product of human invention, an echo of a time gone-by. In Daru, sunlight has always been tinged a wounded orange as far as anyone could remember.

There were no birds aboard obviously, none conscious and about the ship, anyway. Recordings were easy to come-by in Daru. Many bird species still existed, but they were no longer as commonplace as ones bedroom window. Non-domesticated birds usually flew and roosted in areas restricted to humans. Domesticated birds, while not rare, were usually silent.

There was no warm flesh behind her either. He never lay that close to her anymore, not in years. She supposed it was something to be glad of. It was something familiar and routine and . . . not like last night.

She rolled slightly, expecting her arm to hit another body. It didn't, instead flopping on the mattress, which was oddly cool to touch. Usually, she woke up first. He maximized whatever sleep he could to minimize the time he needed to co-exist with her.

Still, there were worse ways to wake up. She had woken up to varying degrees of hell, to dreams within dreams. Urgent cries, sharp commands, the clatter of instruments, the alarum of sensors, a sharp, incising light. . . Her mind could never piece these fragments into a coherent scenario, into something she could pin down and analyze.

Something must have really happened, and those must have been the snatches of memories her mind refused to let fully surface. Shizune, before she underwent Induction, was never very detailed, not where it mattered. She was factual and blunt, would have



listed every single stitch she placed on Sakura's body, had she asked. As to the hows and whys, she kept mum.

"That fetus has demised before I could get to you," the doctor said. "I expected you to die, truth be told. I have no idea how you managed to survive, but I'm not complaining. Of course, I had to take out your equipment. That's where I couldn't stop the bleeding."

Sakura had talked to her partner about it a few times. His account was even more skeletal than their colleague's.

"On your way down the Main Mast, your foot caught in one of the rungs and you fell backwards. The general override disabled all of Freja's internal security measures. You spent fifty-nine hours in the regeneration chamber and sixteen days in a coma from blood loss. Don't ask me how we survived."

The only tangible proof that supported their stories were her scars (and obviously the crew and parts of the ship that were missing). The truth was, Sakura hadn't been too keen about finding out what happened two years ago. She had an inkling they were all just waiting for the other person to start speaking. She never got to the point where she absolutely had to know what they weren't telling her, but that wasn't to say she didn't lose sleep over it.

If he noticed at all, he gave no indication.

Speaking of which, she needed to make sure he had eaten at least one decent meal the past twenty-four hours. Even though things have settled back to routine after the disappointment of Nu-768, he still tended to forgo basic activities of daily living. A while back, there would have been a specialist to take care of things like this. Nowadays, most manual functions were split between the two of them. A great deal of responsibility have been removed from the list, of course, being that only 35% of the original ship's volume remained and thus necessitated only rudimentary up-keeping.

Sakura rose from bed but left making it and changing into her uniform for later. She merely threw on her much-abused work boots before perusing the rest of the ADL quarters for her missing partner. From the quarters, the cockpit was easily accessible. It would be next on her list, should the ADL fail to reveal him.

The ADL quarters were a string of small rooms belonging to the ship officers, surrounding a main chamber that mimicked the living spaces of a typical Darudin domicile—a sitting room, an archive, a kitchen, and a sauna were among its amenities. Nowadays, only the chief engineer's room was occupied.

Sasuke rarely stayed in the common room, so it was no surprise he wasn't there. He usually stayed in the cockpit, meticulously maintaining the various instruments that monitored the Fat Lady's health. The other officers' former rooms were rarely intruded upon. Captain Yamato was one of the casualties that day of the accident. First officer Asuma Sarutobi opted for Induction a few months after it, as did Second officer Akimichi. As for the Staff Captain, Dr. Yakushi. . . ah, but it was hard to keep track of



who went first and how. She peeked into their rooms, nonetheless, quietly closing the doors after her, treading as little as possible into those sacrosanct places.

Sasuke wasn't in the cockpit.

Her guts twisted in quiet fear, but only for a second. He usually was in the cockpit, but there were other places for him to go. The bridge, for one thing, that connected the cockpit to the laboratory, was a pleasant walk that showcased a projection of the actual skies from without. (As opposed to the fabricated one in the cockpit.) He went there when he wished to update the star charts. He usually did avoid the 'combs and the lab, but that was while she worked in those places. It would be natural for him to use the lab, too, once in a while. Besides, he didn't need to be in the cockpit all the time. The Fat Lady hardly needed navigation. In fact, the Fat Lady had little control over where they went. The solar winds decided their direction, the rudder only used for the subtlest changes. They had very little chemical fuel left to power their remaining rockets, which were reserved for landing.

Of course, landing was. . . wishful thinking, at best. Finding a planet with similar kind of species as themselves, or even one potentially capable of supporting their form of life, was unlikely enough with their powerful scopes that sought complex carbon chains. Now, their tools were limited to a handful of probes that were capable of multiple entry and exit through a wide range of atmospheric conditions. Moving as slowly as they were, their only option was to explore the solar system they managed to wander into. It wasn't likely they would be able to escape the clutches of the double star system anytime soon.

Only one of the various laboratories remained in the ship. It had been reserved for biologic studies and other odd projects that didn't fit elsewhere. Cool, aseptic, and contained, it was immediately obvious he wasn't there. Behind glass partitions was a makeshift greenhouse, formerly an area for experimental hybrids of crop plants. Now, it housed the small vegetable garden that fed them daily, as well as the tiny fishpond of tilapia that broke the monotony of protein supplements.

The southern portal of the lab led to an access pod that used to traverse the length and breadth of the ship, a complex gridline of pathways called aptly, the Labyrinth. After the accident, the sole remnant of the Labyrinth was the massive shaft that was called the Main Mast. It was to this pod Sakura went, still in her nightclothes. She grabbed the lab coat slung over her customary chair on her way out.

The steel portals opened to admit her, and just as quietly, shut her in the spherical enclosure. She could feel the contents of her stomach rush to her throat, her body discombobulated by the swift descent. Closing her eyes against the gleam of metal seeming to invaginate her subjected her to a different brand of vertigo. Instead of comforting crimson, white deluged her vision, the sudden rush directionless. Spots invaded her line of sight, multiplied, spun, and spread impossibly into a long tunnel that truncated—far, far away—into that unforgiving, piercing white disc.

She screamed.



Choked.

Then, the world stilled and she could open her eyes again.

The access pod had descended to the lowest tier of the ship and opened directly to the Decontamination Unit. Sakura knew every corner of Decon like the back of her hand. It was where each of her workday began and ended daily, as entering the 'combs required preparations in the sterile chamber.

It was also where they hauled her when they were resuscitating her after her fall. See, even if everybody else kept mum about the story, there was one other source of information, one that did not gloss over anything it had available. The Fat Lady's database carried details of everything that has happened since the mission began, including that accident.

("This is rather cruel, Kabuto, suddenly undergoing Induction," Sakura said, a note of pleading in her tone. "Can't you—?")

"Au contraire," Kabuto said wryly. "Shouldn't you say, 'Sorry, *I've* been cruel the past three months, letting you do this all by yourself?' Something like that?"

"Touche."

"You're welcome. Anyway, save us baby pics. We'd love to see a less prickly Chief Uchiha, even a miniature one."

"And if it turns out to be a girl?"

"Then we get to see the Uchiha as a fatuous, doting Papa." Kabuto smiled, as if imagining this while he stripped off his uniform, unembarrassed. "That should be payback enough."

Sakura could only nod at first, then: "Thank you. And I am sorry. Sarutobi-sensei—"

"I never envied you, Sakura," he interrupted, still kind. "Not for anything. I just want that known for the record."

He fell back into the Aether.)

Nobody forced her, of course, but Sakura felt it her duty to carry out that Induction. It was her job, after all, and it was high time she got over her prejudices and personal misgivings. It was not about how she felt or thought about the procedure. She thought, if she was compromising her values by doing it, then it was a little too late for her to be second-guessing her decisions. After all, why did she undertake the mission in the first place when she already knew what it entailed beforehand?

Her partner was surprisingly silent when she hesitantly shared her reasoning with him, kind enough to keep his opinions to himself, whatever they were. He did so with an uncharacteristic effort that startled Sakura.



Perhaps, she shouldn't have been. Despite his often abrasive manner of speaking, he was quite solicitous and rather protective of her, an observation that frightened her somewhat for what it connoted. It was something she still had trouble admitting to herself at the time: her fears weren't solely grounded on his tendency to dominate her, see. Since what she carried was borne from half his genetic material, she couldn't completely begrudge him of his claim on her body. No, her trepidation stemmed from her own need to have a piece of him in turn, to have some assurance that somehow transcended his dedication to his responsibilities or even his immense, unflappable pride.

In retrospect, she could attribute that aching need to several things. Maybe it was as simple as a competitive drive to surpass a professional peer. It could have been her motherly instinct, her anxiety for her unborn child, her need for a solid promise that she would have a willing partner even long after the birthing. But there were other possibilities she was not prepared to accept or even acknowledge.

(Because there was no way she could expect anything from him in return, not now, not ever.

"Not till hell freezes over," the doctor had said, years and years ago.

"The Endymion Effect suggests it could, Shizune," the resident biochemist pointed out. "And if Hell can freeze over, the Uchiha can certainly thaw."

"I highly doubt that, Temari," Sakura had sniggered. "Not in this universe.")

He seemed oblivious to the constant, niggling anxiety that had plagued her then. Time and fate gave fruition to her fears. The baby she then carried was gone without a trace, and never again would she be able to conceive, not naturally. A few days short of two years later, those concerns seem distant and trivial, hardly anything that should occupy her thoughts so often.

She discarded her labcoat after a brief reflection. She couldn't remember where she had last used it exactly, but it would be safer not to introduce even traces of chemical into the inert atmosphere of the 'combs. The frilly, lacy nightie, yet another keepsake, this time from a college roommate, would be incongruous inside the spare, vast chamber. If Sasuke was indeed there, she would surely be ridiculed for it. What's this, he would ask, a faerie princess descending from high to pirouette about her glow-worm garden?

She had rarely gone beyond the bounds of the ADL without her salmon-colored uniform. Being divested of it made her realize its role as a sort of security blanket. After all, should another accident befall them, it hardly mattered what she was wearing. She was vulnerable either way, a highly ordered conglomeration of matter and energy, waiting to shudder into the chaos it inevitably sought.

At any rate, she didn't mean to stay long in the 'combs. She didn't bother with the details: additional lights, her inspection gear, an adjustment of the thermostat. The



sole portal admitted her quickly into the cavity. She would have preferred to keep it open, but it would automatically shut behind her when she moved further into the darkened chamber.

Only a very subtle lighting made her way visible, evenly distributed throughout the long, narrow enclosure. She could see they lit up small patches of space all the way down to the northern end, a certain number of paces away, she knew. She couldn't remember.

She shivered, both from the chilly air and preternatural touch of the tongue-like slivers of incandescence. A few steps later, her eyes had adjusted to the room's stringent lighting and managed to discover the motionless figure of her sole remaining comrade.

He was sitting with his back to her, quite near the edge of the dais, she thought, but she couldn't see well enough to be sure. She recognized his posture—legs crossed, hands relaxed on his thighs, back straight—as one of meditation. Her steps faltered.

He was the first to speak after a long silence.

"Maybe I am," he said.

"Hm," was all Sakura could come up with as she scrambled her wits together. "What did you say?"

"Praying," he answered after another spell of quiet.

"We all pray," she offered warily when he didn't elaborate. "Whether we mean to or not, sometimes we end up praying. Sometimes, we don't realize we are at all."

She knew, of course, that in Sasuke's birthplace, there were particular rules when it came to praying, as with everything. The soldiers of Dis believed in a distant, voyeuristic god, a singularity that did nothing to influence the universe it created, merely enforced the rules on which it was built. Sakura did not know Sasuke to believe in that Nameless, Faceless One, but it undoubtedly would have been entwined with his upbringing.

"The last time I prayed, I was ten years old," he said conversationally. "I did it the way I was taught, even though a normal kid would have asked for something simpler."

A prayer in Dis encompassed its three primary tenets: the continued movement of the stars, the continued balance of life and death, the continued cycle of destruction and creation. She could only imagine how a young child could negotiate through those involved, abstract verses, especially after learning of the obliteration of his homeland.

"Your family's safety?" she asked gently. Evidently, he had been safe and away when the tragedy struck, was probably nowhere near Dis.

"My brother's death, actually."



Sakura came to sit behind him. She said nothing, though she was tempted to question him closely about this. He had never as much as hinted hatred towards his elder brother, Itachi, a high-ranking prodigy of the Darudin airforce, credited with many breakthroughs, particularly the use of plasma fields in a gamut of arenas, aeronautics and weaponry only being examples. The few times Sasuke had spoken of his brother, only a deep-rooted respect was evident.

“He sold me to the Oligarchs.”

In spite of herself, Sakura became icy. “Daru does not tolerate—”

“I was apprenticed, in exchange for political favors,” he interrupted. She could almost hear him roll his eyes. “It’s common knowledge guilds treat their novices like slaves.”

Guilds were specialized schools that trained gifted children and groomed them in particular specialties determined by exacting aptitude tests and genetic mapping. She had entered one when she was twelve.

“Was allowed to go home on my birthday,” Sasuke continued. “Night before my trip, some idiot flubbed the hourly bolts check and a small tremor from a seaquake halfway across the globe caused the shield to rupture. They evacuated who they can. The rest. . .”

Completely floored by this uncharacteristic outpouring, she stammered, “I-I am sorry for your loss.”

“Of course, you are,” he said with a bark of laughter. It was a mean little laugh that stung her eyes in spite of herself. “This rigmarole is instinctive to you, isn’t it?”

He untangled himself from his position and turned to stare at her. There was an honest, open amusement on his expression that startled her. She flushed, but it was not from embarrassment.

“The ideal Dis wouldn’t have considered it a loss.”

That was congruent with what she learned of Dis culture long ago as a student. The Dis valued perfection, the cataclysmic cycle of destruction and rebirth to reach this state. A mediocre piece of work needed to be redone. An inefficient government needed to be overhauled. A dysfunctional society needed to be annihilated. Rebirth was the ultimate gift, a chance to start over, a shot at perfection. Before rebirth, it followed that Death had to come first.

“Of course,” Sasuke said wryly. “I was never considered anywhere near ideal.”

Sakura managed to recover. “I-If. . . If you had been, you wouldn’t be in this mission.”

“I am more practical than most of my brethren.” He was surprisingly agreeable. “I wasn’t the type to just follow and die. ‘Course I ended up living in a world ruled by a committee. Ironic, isn’t it?”



His sometimes begrudging manner aside, Sasuke was undoubtedly adaptable. The fields of engineering and research were the only two ways of life offered by the Haephestos guild. Only two institutions offered jobs in such fields: the theocratic bureaucracy that ran the world and the massive military that carried out their meticulous orders. Sasuke had gone for the former, while Sakura went for the latter.

Sasuke worked for the Oligarchs, the assembly that created, examined, and updated Darudin laws. They were made up of chosen leaders from various sectors, fields, and walks of life. Sasuke joined the Oligarchs for more than eight years as a representative of the Haephestos guild, specializing in laws that dictated the usage of all machines existing within the Talan solar system. After his term of office ended, the twenty-five year old Dis became an ordinary technology inspector for the Oligarchs, investigating engineering advances for their ramifications on public safety, health, and ethics.

Sakura joined the army as a way to fund her further studies after exhausting the offerings of her humble guild, which was nowhere near Sasuke's in prestige and amount of resources. She served as a foot soldier for several years, climbing the ranks quickly for her tenacity and prodigious grasp of tactics. She was accidentally reunited with an old professor when she was twenty-five, and so left active service to become a biophysics researcher in weapons development.

Sakura first met Sasuke when she was tasked to present a revolutionary idea in criminal incarceration, an accidental finding that confounded many accepted facts in their day. That was how the Endymion Effect was discovered.

(The heat was hellish in the shipyard, only one of the many that was scattered all over the equatorial region of Mu, Nanase's twin. The side of the moon that faced the direct path of Tala's blaze could have been any desert in Daru on a high summer noon. The man standing amidst the equipment, steam, and sheets of metal was equally familiar. She recognized the confident, almost arrogant stance, the indifferent expression that bordered on distaste: it was the person she had traveled thousands of miles for, to appeal her case.

"The deliberation period is over," he said as soon as she was within earshot. "You've come to bother the wrong person."

"I doubt it, Engineer Uchiha," she said, shielding her eyes from the intense sunlight. "I understand now why the Catacomb Prototype failed the official inspection. The respectable engineers of Haesphastos guild had overrun our sectors, overseeing the recommended changes. Very simple changes, really. It's mind blowing, however, their results."

"I'm no longer part of the Oligarchy. I had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, I didn't come here to thank you, Engineer Uchiha," the biophysicist quipped. "So this is the groundbreaking Freja, huh?"



“There are people here who have work to finish. Leave out the rigmarole.”

“I’m sure you’ve had the initial briefing for Project Orpheus. I’ve come to deliver summons. We’re supposed to be in Northern Daru in fifty-nine hours.”

“The pomp and circumstance of an official assignment briefing, I suppose.”

“And a pretty long trip. I might take advantage of it to dissuade you of a few of your misgivings on the Endymion Effect.”

“You never give up, do you, Researcher Haruno?”

“I don’t consider it a fault, Engineer, and perhaps, neither should you.”)

“Well,” he prompted, breaking into her reminisces. “You were looking for me, wife?”

She shook her head to indicate it wasn’t important. Wife. . . she hadn’t heard such an archaic term in a while. Trust Sasuke to unearth it.

“You were meditating,” she said, changing tact. “Any buds of wisdom you care to share?”

Her partner sank into another silence, as if to gather his thoughts.

“You grew up,” he began, seriously, “among people who question everything they sense and perceive, even their every thoughts.”

With Sasuke, conversations weren’t just conversations, especially with a sweeping opening line as such. Sakura listened closely, alert and ready to respond, lest he lose interest when she failed to keep up.

“Their every statement of fact is tested against the rigors of experimentation, passed through a fine-toothed logic based on knowledge obtained through the same, milked from the minds and sweat of countless generations of our species.”

“As have you,” she pointed out. “It’s hard to believe our ancestors once had to conjure colorful stories to explain everyday phenomena. Of course, at the advent of what we call science, our elaborate stories became relegated to mythology.”

He nodded to acknowledge her. “The questions and answers that cannot be tested by our existing tools became compartmentalized under religion, spirituality, and mysticism. Now, the delineation between these. . . belief systems. . . are blurring once again, like they were that time they thought the world was ending, a thousand years ago.”

“I think it’s been like that for the past hundred years,” Sakura murmured. “A millennium ago, people would be screaming for separation of state and church, for example. I think it’s because we’ve ran out of questions to ask. The remaining questions, as you say, cannot be tested. Or maybe it’s not the questions. . .”



“No, not the questions.” He seemed pleased that she has been grasping his points immediately. “We, Darudins, have reached our limit. We can no longer physically comprehend the answers to our inquiries.”

Her expression must have given away her perplexity.

“The answers to these remaining questions are simply beyond our ability to understand. However vast our capacity to imagine, we are still limited by our senses.”

“Because it is by these we know reality as it exists for us,” she agreed, nodding thoughtfully. “They are our only bases. We cannot fully comprehend anything not bound by their terms.”

“A prime example.” He gestured vaguely.

“Aether. We haven’t the faintest idea what it is.”

“Some of the more radical Dis thought it to be the manifestation of the Nameless and Faceless.”

“This is god?” Sakura didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “My mind’s obviously not open enough for that one. If so, there must be something wrong with the Darudin dream of spreading the human species to the most distant stars. We’ve been directly struck by god himself, haven’t we? We are damned.”

“It was a purely academic observation before you started waxing woe-is-me.” He frowned at her, but only briefly. “At any rate, the official purpose of Project Orpheus is mere survival. Eventually, even without that message-from-the-sky nonsense, Tala will die, and before her, Daru. The Oligarchs are practical people.”

“I know,” she said, a trace of bitterness in her voice. “We’re only scouts into a new frontier. Expendable.”

“But not inexpensive,” he reminded.

She smiled at him. He really was kind sometimes.

“Again,” he said after a companionable silence. “Since you parried quite well earlier.”

“Ah.” She started. “Yes. I was looking for you.”

“You’ve found me.”

Sakura hesitated, unsure of how to broach the topic. It had been on her mind for months now. Only last night did she find resolve to come clean. She supposed, it didn’t matter in the end what words she used.

“I’m so sorry.”

She didn’t want to start with an apology either, she thought with a wince. But there it was, tossed on the negotiation table, subject to his disposition for the day.



“When you told me not to, I shouldn’t have. The day the ship broke, I performed Kabuto’s Induction, didn’t I? Something had gone horribly wrong. It was my fault.”

He seemed startled, puzzled, but he quickly mastered his reaction. “You don’t know that,” he said, dismissive. “There is no way to test causality. You remember now?”

“You told me I don’t have the psychological hardness to perform Induction. I didn’t listen. Disaster struck. At least, there is one less victim in that tragedy. My only consolation is knowing Kabuto is somewhere among those living prisms, waiting to arise to a new world. Failing that, theirs would be an easier death.”

If anything, Sasuke’s face only become harder. But then, his usual smirk made its appearance. “You don’t really remember, do you?” he said cryptically. “The Fat Lady doesn’t lie, but you have to ask the right questions. Took you long enough to figure it out.”

“I’ve known for a while. A year, maybe.”

“So you’ve been stewing in guilt over a delusion of grandeur the same length of time. You don’t actually think you have mastery over Aether, do you?”

“You don’t believe in untested theories.”

“I don’t have to believe it. Why waste time on unanswerable questions?”

“Speaking of unanswerable, Freja wouldn’t tell me if the package’s been sent.”

“Package? I’m not known to release prematurely, data or otherwise.”

“But the mission has failed. We can’t produce offspring. We will fester to a miserable death wandering this vast ocean and nobody will be there to replace us. Who do we choose to bring back? How? I don’t think I can bear to damn anybody to our hell, Sasuke. That is my limit.”

“Fascinating.” He didn’t even sound sarcastic.

“Don’t patronize me!” She was more hurt than angry, but was seeking purchase on fighting words. “It’s not that I’ve lost all hope. Or that I want to quit. But maybe. . .”

“You want to pull reverse psychology on the Faceless and Nameless?”

“No! But maybe, if it’s no longer the be all end all, no longer the highest priority, to-die-for mission, we wouldn’t feel our existence as it is as so transient, suspended till we find this new planet that may not even exist. Maybe we could have some semblance of normalcy.”

“Pretend we’re in a space station next door Nanase. Play house. Play happy family. Like we used to do before the ship broke.”

“We don’t have to pretend anything. I just think we’ll be better off if we operate daily with a little bit more contentment, maintain a quiet and unobtrusive hope that. . .



someday. But not now. Not this constant, endless chase that grates on our nerves, our sanity, every waking moment. It doesn't have to be now."

"..."

"It was just a thought. I know, I compromised the mission. I know it's my fault we failed one of the mission's most important stipulations."

"You're not sorry," he said coolly.

She wasn't able to retort, wasn't able to talk around the burning rift in her chest.

"I don't think I can bear to damn anybody else to our hell," he quoted. "If it is your incompetence that caused the incident, then that same incompetence saved her from this hell of yours."

"Sasuke—"

"What? You think thanks are in order? Fine. Thank you for sparing our child."

As if the word, "child," broke some dam within her, Sakura burst into tears.

"Well, something's got to give," she said, when she could again breathe around the gasping sobs. "And I thought something did last night."

He let her cry, allowed the storm to pass uninterrupted. When Sakura looked up to see his stoic expression unchanged, she broke into another round of weeping. She had every intention to break the set of his jaw, with her fists preferably, but she couldn't see very well through her tears and had stumbled instead when she tried. The impact of their bodies was hard enough to cause her head to snap back. She would have fallen back, maybe crack her head against the steel, but he caught her, holding her steady, *en face*. It was unbearable, she thought, so she buried her face on the crook of his neck instead, too tired to shake herself free.

"I thought I was forgiven," she said bitterly.

He seemed genuinely... if not quite flummoxed, disturbed by this. His expressionless visage became creased with a slight frown. This, she felt. She could feel the tension that belied his impassive stance.

"I know you hate me. I know you've had to put up with me all these years because you're immensely proud and stupid in things that really matter, like me. You're not gonna screw a mission over a personal preference or whatever."

"Cut to the chase," he snarled, finally succumbing to the impatience.

"Why did you make love to me last night?"

He stilled. Even her sobs quieted and slowed, as she waited for his answer. She supposed, she wasn't really expecting anything. Probably another misdirection or an outright dismissal. He already said he wouldn't waste time on answerable questions.



As expected, he smirked, though not with his usual one. It was almost an odd little smile he had, lingering at the edges of his lips, incomplete. He let her see this, pulling her to arms length to be able to look at her in the eye. Then, he took her back to him, as if to embrace her, as if to whisper in her ear.

“Something did give, you know,” he murmured. “All these years, I’ve only been able to give you one thing.”

“Sasuke, what—”

“My gift to you, wife, as always, is oblivion.”

He kissed her. It started on that nearby ear, started as a tiny one that gained momentum and intent as it traveled down her jaw line. By the time it reached her chin, it was open-mouthed, searing, like that day in Mu’s shipyard, on Freja’s birthday. A shuddering sigh escaped her lips when they finally joined his, the reunion tender, though hesitant, fraught with disbelief. When it came apparent he wouldn’t relinquish her within the next few minutes, within forever, she relaxed, boneless and pliant against his touch, his roaming, seeking hands.

Apparently, something, as he had said, *did* give.

Later, after rousing her from her pleasant, dreamless doze, he pulled her to her feet. She wasn’t sure how much time has passed to reach this “later,” but the euphoria has yet to dissipate. She allowed him to lead her, his hands twined about hers, so new. . . so familiar.

“Do you know, Sakura, the story of Endymion?” His voice was husky, as if he hadn’t spoken in hours.

“Yes, my husband,” she answered, pert, relishing the taste of the antiquated term on her tongue. “There are several versions of the myth, in fact.”

“In this version, the moon goddess loved a mortal man,” he continued, his fingers busy about her arms, her shoulders, her neck. “She loved him so much, that she asked her father, the Nameless, Faceless to grant eternal days, eternal youth on her lover.”

“And Endymion was bound in eternal sleep,” she said, voice hitching when the gossamer of her nightie finally shimmied down her body to pool about her bare feet. “A romantic story, but awfully sad.”

“Yes.”

It was then he pushed her.

She felt the immediate wrench of gravitation, the sudden and terrifying lack of ground beneath her. It was a gentle little thrust, but it was purposeful and damning.

He pushed her.



Immediately overriding the initial terror was a hot, despairing rage: he tricked her, that manipulative pit viper! He had never trusted the Endymion Effect, never believed it was even good enough to use in humane incarceration of hardcore criminals, and most certainly not as the world's forlorn hope for redemption. He disapproved of it from the start; that disagreement was practically the basis of their relationship. Is this his final argument? Did he aspire to prove his point through an outright, well-crafted attempt at murder?

(Sakura Haruno blacked out when the unseen energy swept her from where she stood, but it wasn't because of the forces that nearly tore her to pieces. The moment she flew was the moment she saw it: Kabuto Yakusho's eyes were open with glassy death. He did not feel the plasmic energy engulf his body, did not feel it when he disintegrated, relinquished his form to a funnel of dust, to naught.)

So. That was what he didn't tell her: she had failed to Induce the Endymion Effect and Kabuto Yakusho was dead, just like all the others, all those names she could recite in her sleep, all those faces she could see in the dark.

That stupid, stupid, incorrigible man—! Didn't he *ever* tire of always being right?

She could no longer summon the words she wanted, not even in thought. It was as if each repelled the other, bounced apart and spiraled away to the deeper recesses of her brain. A certain lassitude seeped from this shadowed area, meandering about her attempts for coherence, till she could no longer feel the cold fingering her nakedness, hear the whistle of the thin air moving against her ears as she fell, or see the dark, immovable eyes of her judge and executioner.

Her savior.

So, was her last thought before the Aether took her, it was the only thing he could give her, he said.

She would take it, as always.

e. Time:

(Major General Haruno was neither well-known or particularly visible in the Darudin scheme of things—at least, not in the public side. Hers was a name often exchanged among the Oligarchs, often with accounts of her brilliant, usually diplomatic solutions to impending crises. See, the problem with any multi-cultural, multi-territorial state was that it was perpetually trying to fall apart.

She had since retired from her quietly celebrated post, but it still affected certain expectations he had. The quiet, unassuming research assistant of the famed Hiruzen



Sarutobi did not seem like the shrewd tactician that had caught the Oligarchy's attention. Petite and slender, she bustled about the sterile laboratory in preparation, efficiently navigating her way around her bigger, more nervous colleagues. While her presentation was informative enough, it didn't seem like she was trying hard to convince him to approve their invention.

The ingenue facade disappeared once he started criticizing their so-called Endymion Effect. The sweet-faced, doe-eyed creature morphed into a pink-furred pitbull that foamed logic and mathematics at the mouth. She has since been debating with him at a purely cerebral level, whatever the topic, she challenged his views. At first he mistook her tenacity as impassioned belief. He realized later that she was merely a person whose purpose in life was to pursue truth, in whatever form it lay, that every question she returned was directed as much to herself as to him.

She was, in other words, a very annoying person.)

Sasuke was awake, but he resisted opening his eyes as yet. There was nothing particularly interesting, nothing particularly needing his attention beyond the maroon protection of his lightly closed lids. He saw what he needed in his mind's eye and it usually sufficed to see him through his usual routines.

Working in shifts no longer made sense; he was the sole remaining hand in the entire ship. He inspected the various navigation equipment every nineteen hours, minded the garden every twenty-three, did maintenance work on the ship every fifty-two, and rounded the 'combs every seventy-four. It was a calm, unhurried living. He slept when he wanted, ate when he wanted. He did keep strict schedules on grooming and exercising, however, to prevent muscle atrophy and bone-density loss. If that wasn't normal enough for her, he didn't know what was.

After Freja's breaking, it had taken a few months before she became well enough to share their old bed. The makeshift infirmary was invariably cold, but she liked burying herself in blankets, anyway, especially with those handmade by that blonde geneticist who was hibernated after Old Sar. Her name was Ina or something like that. Even then, he kept his distance, allowing her to sift through the confusion herself. She was the type that wilted when smothered with attention. She healed better when left on her own, as he and Dr. Shizune learned during the testy few days after Sakura woke up from her coma, hysterical and inconsolable.

Sasuke followed the doctor's orders, answering his partner's questions with the barest, most straightforward answers, entirely skipping the futile exercise of piecing together some platitude to assuage her grief. It wasn't clear whether the gaps in her memory was somatogenic, caused by the closed head injury or the anoxia from the blood loss, or psychogenic, as in a dissociative amnesia caused either by the trauma or by the severe internal conflict from guilt.



He had forgotten when the prescribed meanness became norm, took the form of countless resentments that was never meant to be directed to her. Her delusions became vicious self-fulfilling prophecies, till he truly was the bastard she thought he was and they truly were the enmeshed pair she thought, tethered together by misfortune and fate.

Waking up daily to watch her occupy herself with the imaginary mind games she fancied he was playing with her was tiring enough. Watching her wake up and break out of one nightmare and into another tested his practiced stoic. The bad awakenings were more frequent the first few weeks, wherein she woke up sobbing, trembling, and professing to not know why. These episodes eventually vanished in time, but the way she woke after her regimented eight hours never failed to infuriate him.

She woke like this, gradually, a languorous contentment weighing down her limbs. A smile would dance to her lips, subtle, a habit paired with the tender curving of a hand to her belly. Her brow would furrow, as the confusion muddled that sheer, uncomplicated joy. The distress on her face would dissipate with her increasing consciousness, the massive imbalance settled between two breaths. By the time she was fully awake, she returned to her usual self—to a semblance of it, anyway, because there were cracks here and there that reminded she was not, she was not the woman with whom he accepted this lifelong mission.

(“Do you remember that titillating conversation we had a few days ago, Temari?”

Sasuke didn’t have to turn to know it was her speaking. It was the voice that has been grating his ears for days now, what with the incessant talk about how the inherent inhumanity of capital punishment was an aberration their species should have gotten rid of millennia ago. The woman was a repository of unwanted and unasked for opinions, and damn him if he’d ever admit it but rue he did the day he first challenged her in debate.

“Something about that ancient joke on purgatory being exothermic, was it?” the chemist had quipped.

“Negative, my dear. The corollary exists. Apparently, one Sakura Haruno is capable of making one Sasuke Uchiha go up in flames.”

“How long and how hot?”

“Thawed him enough for one date over hard liquor and why he should have recommended the Endymion Effect for approval for the original project we proposed, not some outlandish space exploration bonanza.”

She went up to him then, even as he pointedly ignored her, and poked his shoulder. What the hell? It was his last day on Daru and if he had to spend it with someone, he might as well spend it with the person he was assigned to by the Oligarchy. It’ll start the desensitization process, at least.



“You’d be gratified to know we’re on speaking terms again, Engineer Uchiha,” she told him graciously. He made the mistake of looking and was disarmed by her brilliant smile.

“Should I file for medical leave now, Researcher Haruno?” He returned gruffly, glaring at the eye-damaging orange of her new uniform. “Save time for when you shatter my eardrums or sanity. Whichever fails first.”

“You told me you weren’t involved with Oligarch decisions, any longer, but I think you wield more influence than you let on. You know, you look nothing at all of what I envision a holy man.”

“I’m not.”

“Not with your blasphemous wit, no.” Her eyes were twinkling, belying her chiding tone. They were the color of the waters of Dis when struck by the rays of dawn. “The ‘combs, indeed. Our colleagues think it’s cute, since it does look like one massive honeycomb.”

“Wait till they load it up with their so-called volunteers.”

“I know.” She sobered. “Catacombs, huh? You really don’t believe in the Endymion Effect, do you?”

“Whether I believe it or not, has no bearing on the mission at hand. Now, stop nattering and carry your own baggage.”

She laughed in spite of herself. “I give up, I give up! For now, anyway. You do realize that a medical leave in this mission equals Induction, don’t you?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“But you want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“I think you’re just like me, faker. I think we’re made for this mission, you and I. We’re off to save the world, Engineer Uchiha, so smile!”)

But one could only hide so much with a smile. The cracks were everywhere, visible and glaring. Something had to give.

Sasuke rose from his favorite chair, the cushioned recliner First Captain Asuma gleefully lugged to the cockpit when he learned Sakura was expecting. Let the Uchiha have no sanctuary, he decreed. As if comfortable chairs everywhere would ensure the biophysicist’s safety. . . At any rate, it gave Sasuke a place to sleep. It usually overtook him in the cockpit, his sanctuary. It was the place she least frequented.

He was hungry and decided a walk to the laboratory wouldn’t be amiss. He did all his cooking there, grilling freshly-caught fish over a Bunsen burner or steaming



freshly-picked vegetables on an all-purpose pot. Using a roundabout way, he did not have to go through the ADL quarters, places he usually avoided. He had no responsibilities in those rooms, so there was no reason to go in them,

He paused at the bridge and looked outside. The sight was no longer as foreign as it was. The spread of stars had become familiar through time, such that he fancied seeing the constellations he had memorized as a child in the extensive stargrams in his father's library and in the only planetarium in Dis where his mother took him on Sunday afternoons. There was no way to tell, of course. Gone were the scopes that would have led closer to answers.

But he did try to tell her. He did, because she deserved to know the truth. She would have wanted to know it. He tried to tell her that she didn't manage to save Kabuto Yakushi, but she did succeed—never mind the five thousand entities supposedly in those catacombs, they could all go to hell—she did succeed in saving herself. He tried to tell her that that was the most important thing.

Sakura didn't like being spoon-fed facts, see. She never took anything at face value, never took his words just as they were. He didn't expect her to. It wasn't realistic to expect anybody, expect her, to believe that cruelty was kindness, that he merely did what he had to.

Resilient and stubborn, she healed at a tremendous speed. The broken pieces reconnected, meshed, but it did so imperfectly. The cracks were still visible, especially when she smiled, and couldn't, couldn't quite smile the way she used to. She lived, but she lived with a limp, pulling along a invisible weight.

She had to be broken, fractured completely. She had to shatter again to pieces. And then, and then, they could piece her again. Slowly but surely. If this insensible, imperceptible reservoir at the bottom of their ship truly was the manifestation of the Nameless, Faceless, perhaps a renewed Sakura would awaken at the end of their journey.

(It took an amazingly gargantuan effort to close the outstretched hand he thought could somehow grasp the bolt of white that fluttered away from below him, but only a fraction of that did he use to slide down the remaining hundred rungs to below. It was no flower petal, no lady's handkerchief, no graceful descent. When she fell, she broke against the much harder flesh of the ship.

He knew all the king's horses, all the king's men. . . only fairytales had perfectly bow-tied endings. Only myths bore explanations to tragedy. Only legends venerated unwilling martyrs. Humans crawled through aftermaths, insensate for a mere second or a whole lifetime, incapacitated by grief, loss. To what degree varied with ones resilience, with the extent of damage sustained, with what was left behind.

He was one of the lucky ones.



There was a horrendous minute when he was alone with her, cursing all the knowledge he acquired his erudite life that hinted nowhere how to save her. Then Shizune was there, and he could breathe and think again.

“Sasuke.” It came from the pallid, mangled mass that mimicked the form of his partner. “Sasuke.”

“Shut up.” Was she going to start a debate when she couldn’t even breathe? “Shut up.”

“The Aether. . .”

She could still open a single eye. It fixed on him like a sniper’s scope, the crosshairs distorted by the broken lens. The white of her eyes was the white of her flesh, the red lightning on the preternaturally white sky was the red of her escaping lifeblood. It was a contained storm that quietly tested its man-made bonds, but it threatened to engulf him and rip him to shreds.

“My baby. . . My baby, Sasuke. . . Aether.”

He ignored her delirious muttering. “Shizune, can you fix her?”

“We shouldn’t really move her.” The doctor’s voice was abrasive, hollow. Uncertain. “Her back—”

“Can you fix her, doctor?”

“Yes.” The dark-haired woman threw him a look so fierce, he would always remember her by it. “I will!”

“Please. . . please. . .”

It had been her litany until the blood loss forced a blessed darkness onto her.)

He was tired.

The few-minutes walk from the cockpit to the bridge seemed hours long. Even with the cocktail of drugs released by the apothecary, it still seemed so difficult to get enough air. He was tired of fighting for his breath, tired of treading the unseen waters that only manifested in each rattling gasp. There was only so much years you could force onto a single organ. There was only so much he could delay.

How long has it been? He hadn’t bothered to keep track anymore, so he couldn’t tell. Freja would know, of course. Freja already knew what to do, as soon as his last act has been fulfilled. They’ve drawn up several plans, depending on the circumstances of their descent, on which group of people to bring back from the honeycombs. Of course, they would have to get straight to work. They would have to take over from there.

(He even had their names memorized: Naruto Uzumaki, the orphaned prince of a long-forgotten empire, would be their charismatic leader. He had an unsullied idealism



and an unshakable political will that would carve the base of their civilization. Shikamaru Nara would be his right-hand man, an immensely intelligent city planner the Oligarchy discovered by accident, who would lend practicality to the Magistrate's edicts. General Gaara would ensure discipline and order, would carry out the appropriate plans and ensure everyone's cooperation. Meanwhile, the mystical hermit Jiraiya would serve as a moral compass. Dr. Hinata Hyuuga, Researcher Shino Aburame, Lee Rock, the names went on. . . It was decided years ago, by the Oligarchy, when they decreed to resurrect Project Orpheus. It was decided then who would plant the beginning seeds of a new Daru.

See, the name Sasuke Uchiha was never supposed to be there.

Hers was.)

He would rest a few more moments, he decided, then he would walk back to the cockpit and finish it. He would look a few more moments at the orb of green. blue, and brown, generously swathed with the white of condensed water vapor. He wondered what she would say to that sight. He wondered what she'd think.

He'll be damned if he ever conceded she was right.

Nothing short of cataclysmic, was it?

He slowed his breathing with conscious effort, schooled it into an exacting pattern that maximized the oxygen his lungs could draw from each gasp. Pain lanced across his chest, began to solidify, to take a more substantial form, till a crushing density replaced the infrequent stabs.

He was drowning.

Wait, he thought, as his world contracted, as his darkness drew in.

I'm almost there ...

The Human Stain

There was more blood than she expected.

Haruno Sakura stood in the front entryway of the old cathedral, staring grimly inwards at the carnage. The stairs leading up to the stone arch of the entryway had been liberally splashed with blood, the dark red puddles gleaming almost black in the late afternoon light. Inside the structure was more of the same: if there wasn't more blood than paint on the walls and ceiling, it was a near thing. Both of the oversized, ornate front doors were open, one more than halfway off its hinges and leaning awkwardly against the inside wall, the other bent into an uneven u-shape and tossed with obvious carelessness into a brass stand that had once held prayer candles.





The marble floor was marred by deep scores and long, spidery cracks ran through the stone walls all the way up to the ceiling, testament to countless fierce struggles that must have taken place there. Dust hung heavy in the air, and glass and stone from the shattered stained glass windows and the statues of various forgotten saints crunched underfoot as Sakura carefully took a step into the nave, though there was also a muted squelching sound when she brought her boot down.

She wasn't seeing anything new here, nothing she hadn't already seen three score times at the very least, but even after years of experience, the amount of blood one found at these sorts of "incidents" (as the Hunter's Union PR department chose to call them) still managed to impress her.

She lingered in the doorway for a few seconds longer, drawing strength and warmth from the sun on her back; promising herself that this was not the last time she



would enjoy that subtle heat, she readied her gun and her hunter's stave, then stepped forward over the threshold, into what might very well prove to be the lion's den.

She had followed his trail here, to the ruins of St. Michael's—an old church, likely the oldest in the City: it had been ruins when the Hunter's Union had first been formed more than a century ago. It was clever of him, choosing a place that many would overlook due to its original purpose; after all, there were few enough churches that would admit him now.

But no congregation met at St. Michael's, and without people, a church is only a building.

Regardless, it was still a house, and therefore still had a threshold, but Sakura knew that there was more than enough blood slicking the stones to have broken it, though in a case such as this, open doors were invitation enough.

From what she could see, it was an invitation that had been taken fairly often. Piles of bones were heaped amidst the rubble of the stone pews and religious reliefs, all of them obviously human, making this place easy to ID as a nest. Or former nest, rather, since the freshest layer of blood was from the three scores of Vampire corpses littering the building.

Sakura paused before one of the many bodies, crouching to study it, though she only looked it over with half an eye. Coming here on her own, without a partner, meant she had to be even more alert than usual. Vampires were fast, several times stronger than a normal human, and silent when they wanted to be; even though she was fairly certain this nest had been completely wiped out, Sakura was too smart to chance giving any possible survivors the element of surprise on top of all that. But even a quick look at the corpse told her all that she needed to know:

Vampire, male. Estimated time of death, two to four hours ago. Cause of death, disembowelment and subsequent exsanguination coupled with fourth-degree burns on approximately 63% of the total body surface.

A similar glance at other corpses showed much of the same, though more than a few had been decapitated. A few also sported single bullet wounds, or cuts from a blade that had burned through their flesh; only a Hunter's gun could kill with a single bullet, and a Blessed silver blade was the only thing that could cauterize a Vampire's flesh like that. It wasn't uncommon for a Hunter to carry both—Sakura did herself—but there was only one Hunter left alive who was capable of performing fire spells at the level displayed here, and judging by the extent of the physical damage to these corpses...

Sakura's eyes narrowed as they settled on the neck of the nearest Vampire. Every one of these Vampires had the faint, tell-tale scar over their carotid artery indicating that they had been Made.



There were two kinds of Vampire in the City, Natural Vampires and those who had been Made. No one was quite sure where the first Natural Vampires had come from, or how long they had been around, but Made Vampires had only become common within the last century. Vampires were Made when a human was fed upon by a Vampire and then drank fully-human blood themselves. Made Vampires tended to be high-strung and mentally unstable, oftentimes because they had resisted the Making and fought against the urge to drink human blood with everything in them for weeks, sometimes months, only rarely more than a year. Those who had been fed upon but had not yet given in to that desire were labeled Half-Turned, and were often just as dangerous as the Vampires themselves; in all the histories handed down though the many families of Hunters, there had never been a case recorded where a Half-Turned did not slowly go insane with bloodlust. The only way to avoid it was to give in, though research had shown that the madness could be slowed by drinking the blood of other Half-Turned. Drinking the blood of a Vampire did nothing but make them stronger, and even a Half-Turned was nearly as strong and fast as a full Vampire.

It was the job of the Hunters to keep the general population safe from the Vampires, and also to keep the number of Vampires in check. They had done so for centuries, information, responsibility, and sometimes special abilities (magic and the like) passed down through certain families for generations. Until recently, both Hunters and Vampires had been fairly uncommon; only within the past century, with the sudden increase in the number of Made Vampires and the subsequent formation of the Hunter's Union, had the two become publicly acknowledged. Patrols of Hunters in their standard Union uniforms were now a familiar sight in the City, and only very foolish or very brave civilians chanced the streets after sundown. Everyone knew now what roamed the City at night.

Sakura began picking her way through the old building more quickly. Now that she knew beyond a doubt who was responsible for this slaughter, there was no reason to look at any more of the bodies, and even if this nest had been emptied, she didn't want to be caught in this part of town too long after nightfall.

A whisper of sound, the faintest stirring of the air off to her left was the only warning she had before the Vampire was almost on top her. To say she'd been expecting it would've been giving her too much credit, but she was ready for it nonetheless, already halfway through a powerful flat swing with her Hunter's stave by the time her brain caught up with her reflexes.

The stave caught the Vampire, a hideously deformed, almost rocklike thing, in the side of the head, upsetting its balance and sending it sprawling sideways with a snarl; before it could recover, Sakura had punched a cleverly-hidden button on the stave, freeing the spring-loaded Blessed silver blade, and swept the stave-turned-scythe around and down in a mighty overhanded arc. Blood splattered the already saturated carpet, flesh sizzled at the touch of silver, and the monstrous Vampire let out an agonized shriek,



convulsing around the blade lodged in its chest that pinned it to the marble floor like an insect in a child's collection.

Without letting go of the scythe's shaft, and without a second's hesitation, Sakura brought the gun in her other hand to bear, settling it squarely between the creature's eyes and squeezing off two quick shots. Double-tapping like that was a simple safety precaution: it was unlikely for someone to survive a single headshot; it was next to impossible for them to survive two, Vampire or not, and Sakura wasn't the type to take any chances.

As the echo of the gunshots faded away and the body slumped to the ground, it started to shift back into its original, more human-looking form. Sakura watched warily—sometimes these shifts were a ruse, playing dead to lower a Hunter's defenses and enable one final attack—but with the top half of its head missing, she doubted it was a trick this time. Still, for some reason she watched, until (quite suddenly, it felt like) she found herself looking down into the vacant reddish-orange eyes of a surprisingly young-looking Vampire. She frowned, checking and double-checking both sides of his neck, but there was no scar—a Natural Vampire.

Natural Vampires were somewhat rare, and were born from the union of two Vampires, Made or Natural, it didn't matter. They were also considered something like Nobility among the Vampires since they tended to be stronger and have special abilities, such as the monstrous form this one had exhibited. That meant, among other things, that it was somewhat unusual to find them in places like this without some sort of reason...

Sakura holstered her handgun then, with a low grunt of effort, wrenched her scythe free—a two-handed job, since it had buried itself deeply in both the Vampire corpse and the stone floor beneath it—and as the weapon finally tore away, she caught herself staring at the boy's face again, pausing in the middle of wiping her blade clean.

Maybe it was because she was in a church for the first time in years, or maybe it had something to do with the fact that this Vampire had so obviously been close to her own age, or maybe it was something else entirely, but Sakura found herself murmuring a snatch of the ancient prayer her teacher had always said in times like this, words the Hunter's Union in all its political correctness would doubtless have frowned upon: "Misereatur tui omnipotens Deus."

May God have mercy on you.

She started to cross herself, then stopped, her hand settling on the gun strapped to her thigh instead as she looked down at the still form grimly; without another word, she turned her back on it and continued on her way.

He was here. She knew it the instant she stepped into the Northern Transept, and her grip tightened on the handle of her gun, tensely ready to draw at the slightest possible threat. The smell of blood was stronger here, and fresher too, which meant Vampires weren't the only corpses she'd find there.



She found him in the Lady Chapel, slumped against the far wall, just out of the reach of the sun filtering through the intricate stained glass window above him, though her attention was riveted solely on him.

He was surrounded by corpses, piled so high and mangled so badly that if she hadn't been searching specifically for him, she might've overlooked him altogether. He was an island in a sea of blood—his own and that of the bodies surrounding him—and a closer look showed that he had been horribly wounded: ribs were showing through a gaping hole torn in his side, one shoulder was dislocated, one arm and at least one of his legs were broken, but that was nothing for a Vampire. So long as they could still feed, they could recover from injuries that would've killed a normal human outright. But when she'd seen him last, Sasuke had still only been Half-Turned, and had refused to drink human blood, though from the reports she'd heard and the look of the corpses surrounding him, Hunters and Vampires alike...

You wouldn't be here right now if you didn't think there was a chance that he'd already become one of Them.

Sasuke was a big mark; by all rights, Sakura knew she shouldn't have tried to take him on alone, but this was Sasuke. They'd grown up together, trained together, and they'd even been partners once upon a time, perhaps in more ways than one, and she owed him at least that much loyalty. She *had* to try.

Still, everything she felt for him, all those warm and worried feelings couldn't stop an instinctive pang of fear from thrilling through her when his eyes snapped open, snapped up to lock with hers.

Red.

Blood red.

Still not Turned, but far too close.

The eye contact was brief—Sakura knew better than to draw it out, knowing the primal aspect so prominent in Half-Turned and Made Vampires often caused them to take that as a challenge, and knowing as well that more than a few Vampires had the power to bewitch and entice, putting you under their control by way of nothing more than a simple glance—and so she turned her eyes away, upwards, focusing on the coloured panels of glass above him and the sunlight streaming through them.

Sasuke caught her gaze, and briefly turned his own upwards to look at the brightly coloured glass as well.

“Saint Michael.”

The words were quiet and unstrained despite his condition, and Sakura caught herself holding her breath to make sure she didn't miss any of them. How long had it been since she'd last heard that voice?



“Archangel. Patron saint of police officers, paramedics, mariners...and the sick.”

And no one could be considered more sick than I am right now.

The implication did not go unnoticed by Sakura, though she didn't interrupt, and Sasuke continued, calm and coldly matter-of-fact:

“Most often depicted carrying scales—for judgment—along with a sword and banner...and treading upon a great serpent.”

His attention had focused somewhere behind her, and though Sakura hadn't sensed anyone there, she turned her head slightly out of curiosity, still keeping half an eye on Sasuke—at least until she caught sight of what he was looking at.

There was a body nailed to the stone wall, bits of black, rusted metal that looked like they had once been parts of a heavy iron grille, like the portcullis that had once defended the cathedral's mighty front doors, driven through the wrists and ankles, holding it there spread-eagled.

Whoever it was had had their throat torn out, the wound so savagely thorough that the spine was easily visible, dully gleaming in the failing sunlight; there was hardly a scrap of skin or tissue left between the figure's shredded shoulders and slackly gaping jaw. He (the corpse was male, Sakura could still tell that much) had been disemboweled as well, ribs and backbone showing through there also, though only in patches. The bloodstains on the wall and the half-dried pool of scarlet beneath the figure made it obvious that the killing—the torture—had been done there, that whoever it was had most likely still been alive when he'd been brought to St. Michael's.

There was too much damage, too much blood on the face, especially around the right eye, for a positive ID, but Sakura caught the gleam of metal lying against the wall at the edge of the spatters of gore: a pair of dogtags. She had to use a fingernail to scrape away some of the blood before she could read the name engraved on them: *Danzou*.

“...The head of the Hunter's Union.” She turned wide, worried eyes back on her former partner. “Sasuke—”

“He was Half-Turned himself. Did you know that? The Union isn't what you think, Sakura. They have their own motives for everything. *Everything*,” he said again, more firmly, when Sakura opened her mouth to protest. “Why do you think the number of Made Vampires is higher than it's ever been when there are so many capable Hunters available? They're not trying to *save* anyone, they're trying to take over. And what better way to do it than a slow slide into martial law.”

Swallowing around the sudden lump in her throat was difficult, but Sakura managed to get out a quiet, if not entirely strong, “...How do you know this?” She knew all too well how he knew, but she asked anyway. She'd more than half known most of it herself, and had suspected it for even longer. It certainly explained a lot—the scrambled messages in the top-secret files she'd accidentally hacked into last month, the



increasingly stricter views and policies the Hunter's Union had been authorizing and enforcing, Danzou abruptly replacing Tsunade as the head of the Hunter's Union a few years back, without warning or even a call for a vote...

"Itachi."

Sakura started at the name, though she was more surprised by the tone he'd spoken it in. Gone was the hatred, the all-consuming rage and bloodlust, in its place, a hollow sort of pain, a sadness and a deep regret.

A tone that warned her to be wary with her next words. "Sasuke," she began slowly, cautiously, "I know he was your brother, and that you were very close, but...after what happened, what he became...it can change some people so much, so do you really think he's—?"

"He did it for me."

Sakura could only look at him, dumbfounded into silence as she tried to grasp what Sasuke was telling her, that all this time...

"He did it for *me*," he said again, this time scarcely a whisper, the words a broken confession or a ragged prayer. "They all did. He let himself be Tainted and Turned, and they...just *gave* themselves to him, gave him their power, knowing that he would need it—that *I* would need it—to fight, to avenge them...to survive."

"Diablerie," Sakura murmured, and Sasuke nodded. The transfer of power and certain innate abilities through consuming another's blood—enough blood for it to be fatal to the victim. It had been outlawed entirely by the Hunter's Union on that assembly's formation, and it had been considered taboo by the various clans of Hunters long centuries before that. Drinking the blood of a Vampire couldn't Turn you, though it did give the one who drank it supernatural strength; however, there were still all sorts of possible risks involved, especially considering the fact that the effects of diablerie were compounded. The power gained through it would be not only that of the drained Vampire, but all the power of any Vampires—or Hunters—that Vampire had drained. The sudden power surge could be painful and dangerous, both physically and mentally, more so to humans than to Vampires, and there had been various different side-effects whispered about, everything from growing fangs and losing the ability to stand strong against sunlight to requiring some sort of blood to supplement, if not fully supplant, their diet. Of course, technically all of that was mere gossip, almost folklore, since none of the clans would (or lawfully could) admit to the practise, though it doubtlessly still took place among a few of them.

Sakura shook her head, backtracking a little. "I thought Madara was to blame for all the new Made Vampires."

Sasuke gave a mirthless chuckle. "Madara is dead."

"How—"



“After what I just told you about Itachi, about my family, do you really think anyone else could have done this to me?”

Sakura closed her mouth with a snap, then shook her head again, only to lift her chin a moment later with a noteworthy measure of defiance and say, “Naruto.”

“Madara had to die,” Sasuke continued, pointedly ignoring the mention of his best friend. “He was dealing with the Union. Maybe he was the one who started twisting it in the first place. But he was the one who decided that my family—once *his* family, too—had to die. They were too strong, and they never would have let someone like Danzou take over the Hunter’s Union, or let the Union try to be more than it was supposed to be.” He smiled, but there was no warmth in it; only cold satisfaction made that much more ghastly by all the blood and carnage surrounding him, staining his clothes, his face, his eyes. “And so the Half-Turned killed the Original Vampire.”

But at what cost? Sakura added silently, not knowing that Sasuke was doing the same.

“... Why are you telling me all this,” Sakura said, not really a question so much as a desperate attempt to let him prove her wrong, because she already knew the answer, knew there could really only be one reason. “It’s... it’s not like you...”

“Because someone has to know. Someone has to remember, and make sure the truth gets written down in the annals and histories and the Hunters’ Records. Someone has to stop them, and I’m not a part of the Hunter’s Union any more, so it’s not my fight. And now that I’ve fulfilled my purpose, there’s nothing left for me, nothing left that I still want. There’s no reason for me to resist the Taint anymore.”

...Except, perhaps, one thing.

“Sakura.”

Whether she’d forgotten, or she just trusted him too much to be wary of that kind of trick, this time she didn’t flinch away from making solid eye contact, and suddenly it seemed like a very good idea to move closer, to kneel right beside him and allow his fingers to trail along her arm, her neck, her jaw, to let him lean forward and kiss her. She started to resist at first, some inborn survival instinct insisting that this was a trap, that this was *dangerous* and she should be running, but his mouth was warm, and the gentle tug of his teeth on her lower lip was comforting in its familiarity, and she let her eyes drift close as she opened her mouth to his. She realised with a hazy sort of awareness that Sasuke had pulled her down into his lap, that she was straddling his hips, but instead of panicking, she let herself melt into the unexpectedly intense kiss—

—Only to jerk back as the metallic taste of blood flooded her mouth. It wasn’t hers, it couldn’t be, she reassured herself as she pushed him away and scrambled backwards off his lap, because it tasted different, and it was strangely cool—not *cold*, just not quite as warm as hers would have been. She coughed and spat but she was certain she’d swallowed some already, and she knew far too well that in these sorts of situations,



any at all was too much. Still, if she could move fast enough and make herself throw up—

“Don’t.” There was an uncanny sort of power in that single word that made it a command, and Sakura obeyed without consciously thinking about it, watching but not retreating any further as he leaned towards her again. “It won’t Turn you or Taint you...” Reaching up, he gently caught her face between his hands, pulling her back to him, close enough that she could feel his words on her lips. “...And the more you drink of it, the better. The stronger you’ll be.”

His mouth found hers once more, enticing her lips to part, slipping more of his blood past them with each careful tug and pull of his mouth on hers...and that was when Sakura realised what Sasuke was *really* doing:

He was giving her his power. *All* of it. Diablerie.

“No,” she gasped, breaking off the kiss, trying to sit back, to pull away, anything that would put some space between them. “I don’t want it—”

“But you’ll need it.” His expression was hard, harder than it had ever been now that he was Tainted, and a brief meeting of eyes was all it took to silence her protests. “From now on, you’ll need all the power and strength you can get.”

She didn’t agree, and it was obvious that she didn’t like it. But she didn’t disagree either. Sakura had always been smart: he was reasonably certain that she knew that this was the only way he could protect her now. He’d been fighting the Taint for a long time, and he’d held up surprisingly well, a lot longer than the Hunter’s Records had said was even possible. But it was ultimately a losing battle; he’d known that from the first, before he’d ever allowed himself to become a Half-Turned, but he’d chosen it anyway. He’d needed it, needed the strength it promised and the power it bestowed.

But it was a one-way street: there was no cure, no way to turn a Vampire back into a human. He’d seen the signs; he knew he was slowly losing control, losing himself, and now that he’d done what he’d had to do, what he’d let himself be changed into a monster for, now that he’d finally gotten his revenge, Sasuke knew that it had to end before he lost himself completely and did something he’d regret.

Which was why he’d let her find him.

The hands cupping her face were gentle but firm, strong fingers digging into her neck and the little hollows below her ears with just enough pressure to let her know that she wouldn’t be able to break away from him again.

He eyed her closely, watching as she gave an almost imperceptible nod and leaned into the next kiss, letting him seal his mouth against hers again and again, pouring himself into her until he felt weak and empty...but even now, he knew he could change his mind. Even in this weakened state, he was still many times stronger than she was; all he had to do was feed on her and he’d get it all back and more besides.



He knew the idea should be a tempting one, especially with how *good* she tasted, how perfectly her body still fit against his, how flawlessly she matched her movements to his. It should have been alluring, exciting, a reflexive impulse almost impossible to refuse.

Somehow, it wasn't.

"End it," he panted, knowing that weariness was the only thing still keeping his thirst in check. "Now." Weariness, and perhaps that one other thing...

"Sasuke...I still love you."

His expression didn't change in the least, nor did his gaze waver, and for a moment that felt much longer than it really was, they merely looked at each other. Then the tightness in the skin around his eyes eased, his eyelids lowering fractionally, and he bowed his head, an uncharacteristic movement fraught with submission, defeat, and acceptance.

"That's why you're the one who has to end this," he said softly. "And why I'm letting you." A subtle suggestion of the word *because* lingered around momentarily pursed lips, but his mouth tightened before it or any words that might have followed it could escape.

Instead, he reached out, lightly pushing her away, letting his hand slide across her not-quite-flat midriff with the tiniest trace of a smile. He could feel it already, could hear it and even smell it, that life, but he knew it would be a while longer before Sakura herself knew. She wouldn't have come here if she'd known—or would she? She could be so annoyingly stubborn about these things...

"Don't take these kinds of risks anymore," he added, letting his gaze run over her as she stood, though his eyesight was already growing a little dim, a little wavery at the edges. "There's too much at stake."

Sakura nodded, but she didn't miss the way his eyes had lingered just half a second too long on her throat as he looked up at her, a simple observation that hurt more than it should've. It reinforced the already painful truth that what she'd come here to do was indeed necessary; that if he'd even consider attacking her, however fleeting that consideration might be, he was just as much of a threat to the City as any fully-Turned Vampire. Still, her hand trembled as she raised her gun, setting the sight wavering, briefly hovering on his forehead before skittering down and away, settling on the empty air beside his shoulder instead.

She wanted to refuse. She wanted to give up, to turn around and go back the way she'd come, and forget any of this had ever happened. She wanted to feel his lips against hers once more, his body pressing down on her, his mouth on the pulse in her throat. She wanted to stay with him, to be what he would be, to be with him forever, even if she knew it would be a nightmarish forever full of darkness.



She wanted to cry, because she knew she was too strong to allow herself any of those easy outs, and she loved him too much to let him become one of *Them*.

Swallowing her tears and another confession that she knew would've only come out broken, would've only hurt both of them even more, she simply looked at him, her face saying it all, his betraying nothing, though maybe there was the slightest hint of a curve to one side of his mouth, and maybe his eyes were just a bit softer than usual, and maybe the words he'd never said aloud were, if not audible, then instead somehow tangible for that short space of time.

The moment stretched on until Sasuke gave a minute nod, his gaze steady on her face, not closing his eyes or looking away even at the last.

Pressing her lips together in a grim line, Sakura raised the gun once more, holding it steady with both hands this time, sighted down the barrel again, and without another flicker of hesitation, fired—twice.

White Walls

Dear Sasuke,

I don't like the walls here.

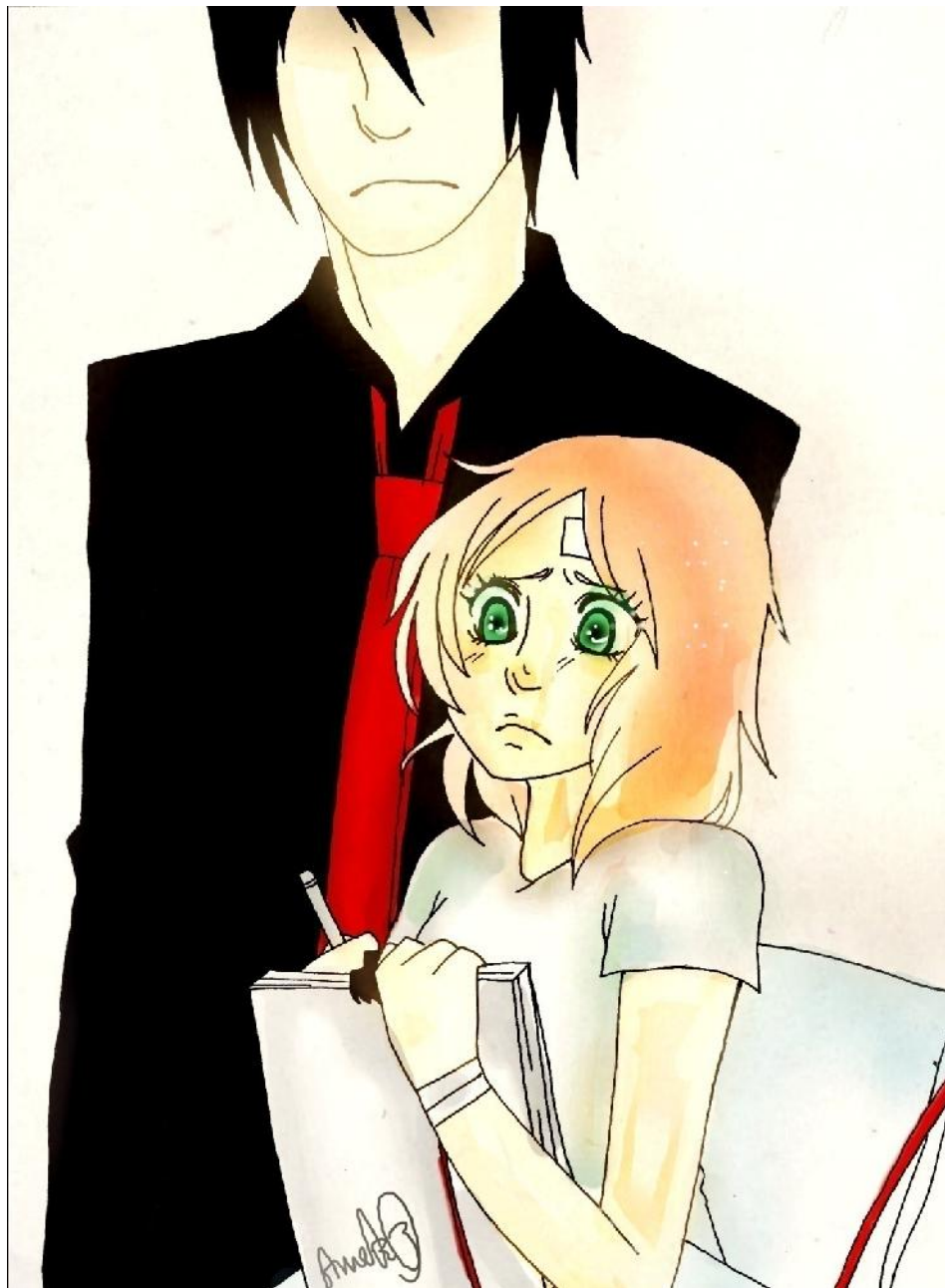
They're white, or at least something like that. Maybe it's more of an off-white color, just between peach and beige. I'm not all that sure to be honest, because it all really depends on the lights. But then again, aren't all white walls like that? Its color changes depending on the hue of the bulbs that'll illuminate it, right?

Maybe they're getting to me—the walls, I mean. Maybe seeing them every damn day is affecting me, making me lose my mind. I hate it here, Sasuke. I just want to go home. Why the hell am I here?

But you know, I've met this boy. Don't worry, there's no need to be jealous, he's only thirteen. He's irritatingly loud, but he's nice, I guess. I can't remember his name since I only spoke to him once. He kind of reminds me of Naruto, except like, he's suicidal and cuts himself. Sort of. I can't help but feel slightly amused at the criss-crosses running down his wrist. I think it looks a little silly, like some morbid board just waiting to have tic-tac-toe played on it.

I don't like it when people cut their wrists. They seem fake to me. In my opinion, those people don't really want to die. They just want someone to realize that they're hurting and that they want some help. Don't you think so too? If you want to die, like really *die*, then just slice up the artery somewhere in the upper-arm. Or the jugular perhaps. Isn't that the best way to ensure death using a knife?





Hanging is a good one too, though. I mean, once you're up there flailing from the lack of air, you can't take it back. It's really one of those what's-done-is-done



situations. You'll be dead and all before anything else.

Don't worry though, I haven't gone suicidal. I wasn't trying to kill myself when I had that overdose. Honestly, that was an accident. Plus, I wasn't starving myself to death. I just wanted to be pretty. Was that so wrong?

And do you remember that one time when you saw me cut myself? I was just being like that boy. I know which places are vital to cut but I did it to my thighs, anyways. And it's not even *that* deep, but just enough to make some kind of mark. To make a bloody little line. To make something, like a scar. For some attention. I'm horrible, aren't I?

But then again, it's not like I'll show off my thighs to get attention. I'm not the girl with the shallow slits on her wrists just so people will look at her. Maybe it's for my amusement. I know, I know. That's just messed up.

Or maybe because 95% of blood is water, according to what I've read. But that's obvious, right? I mean, blood *is* a liquid. And about 55% of the body is made of water. So maybe if I bleed more, then I'll lose weight and I won't have to starve myself—well, not that I can do either of those now.

But if I can, won't that be totally great?

Well, I have to go to my group therapy now, Sasuke.

I love you. I'll see you soon, okay?

*Love,
Sakura*

Dear Sasuke,

I really miss everyone.

I miss my mom, Naruto, Ino, Kakashi and just everyone... maybe even my dad. I miss you, too. Maybe the most, but I'm not too sure.

There's a part of me that blames you, you know. It makes sense though, because instead of wasting anymore of my breath in wishing you're here, hoping that maybe you will—I'm telling myself that this is your entire fault. Sometimes, when I'm in the art room ripping papers into little squares so I can make paper cranes, I wish I'm ripping you apart.

You didn't have to bring me to the hospital. I would've puked it up, I'm sure. I just wanted to sleep. And it was a one time thing. I was just mad. My dad came home and he was being a total bastard. He told me I was useless and that I probably wasn't even his. When I was younger, I used to wish I wasn't. You know, he should be here, not me. Paranoia isn't very flattering, don't you think?

But back to you. Yeah, screw you, Sasuke.



I only did it because I wanted a break. I just wanted to sleep. The pills never worked when I took them right, so I usually just didn't bother. I was just so tired that night Sasuke. I took two at first, I swear. Then after an hour, I took another two or three... or more. I don't remember.

We used to do drugs together, remember? You, me and Naruto would hangout at the elementary school's playground and smoke weed at like, two in the morning. I used to make you push me on the swings because that made the high feel even more amazing. I almost miss it, you know—the three of us together, the high, the fun.

I miss a lot of things.

Thanks a lot, for bringing me here.

You might be happy to know that I ate my breakfast this morning. I had half a bowl of oatmeal and five bites of my apple. The doctor's were really proud of me, you know and said that I was finally making progress.

They're going to weigh me tomorrow morning before breakfast to see if I've gained any weight since I came in. I really hate you, you know, for not only telling them I'm suicidal, but also that I'm anorexic as well. Oh well, I'm assuming it was you.

I'm scared, though. I know I've barely eaten, but I haven't exercised either so I'm sure I still weigh the same. What if I really *haven't* changed, Sasuke? What if they make me stay even longer?

Sasuke, why is everyone trying to tell me what to do?

My life is mine, right?

Love,
Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

Help, I'm alive.

I'm feeling things. I know I'm alive. I'm trembling and stumbling and it seems like these *people*—these doctors, and nurses, and the other fucking nuts I'm stuck with—are going to eat me alive.

I hate it here, I just can't stand it. I'm angry. I'm alone and the walls, the stupid goddamned *walls*, are just all the fuck around me! I want to go *home*, Sasuke,

I don't want to be here anymore.

Can you just come get me? Please, Sasuke?

We can go back to how things used to be, you know. It'll be wonderful. We can go buy something nice from Shikamaru and smoke it up where we used to.



You know, when you carried me to your car after I took too many sleeping pills, Sasuke, I was a bit coherent. I think. I may have been imagining it but I swear you said, “What the heck is wrong with you?” to my not-completely-unconscious-self. I’m not sure since it’s all hazy that I don’t remember anything past that question. The next thing I know, I’m in the psych ward.

I told you though, in my last letter, that I was angry. I told you *why* I was mad at my dad, but not why I was mad at you, at the world and everything else.

Maybe it’s because I don’t know. Maybe I’m just that messed up.

Maybe, despite all my complaints, it’s good that I’m here.

You didn’t expect that, did you—I can complain all I want and I’ll probably take this back later, but since I’m too neurotic to scratch out what I’ve already written down, I’ll let you have it: you did me a favor by bringing me here.

They’re *really* taking care of me here. All I have in my room is a bed, a night table with a really ugly lamp, a desk, and a chair.

There’s nothing other than those few pieces. They think I’ll try to kill myself, but I like to think I’m pretty creative. I can use the legs of the chair, or the bulb in my lamp to do something nasty. Haven’t they thought of that?

Oh, wow, it looks like I’ve strayed from the topic. What was the topic, anyway?

Whatever, this letter is getting too long anyways.

Who knows? Maybe now that I’ve shared my little secret you’ll reply.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

You still haven’t responded. You haven’t replied to anything, you bloody coward. Stop being a wimp and talk to me! What the hell is your problem?

I’m in a room with big white walls, with doctors, and nurses, and counsellors who think they’re so great for “helping” us. They look at me like I’m crazy, Sasuke.

I hate it.

I want to go *home*, Sasuke. I hate you, you fucking bastard.

What happened to *loving* me, and taking care of me, and helping me, and supporting me, and all that complete bull? What happened to that whole ‘us’ thing? Where the heck are you, bastard?

I got a visit, you know. It was Ino. I told her I’ve been sending letters and when I asked her what your problem was, she changed the subject. I’m guessing that you’ve



been too down or whatever to pick up a bloody pen to send me a ‘hello’ or an ‘I miss you’ or even better, to move your ass and *visit me*.

Maybe you’ll try to kill yourself, too. Maybe one of these days, while sitting in the lounge with the boy who reminds me of Naruto, I’ll hear a ‘Guys, someone new will be joining our group therapy this evening, okay?’. And you’ll enter with all your aloof glory bearing cuts all over your upper arms because you really did read my first letter.

I miss you, Sasuke. I’m angry at you, of course I am. I mean, you brought me to this hell-hole, but I miss you. I miss your arms around me. I miss your kisses, your touch. I miss lying in your bed after a nice, hard lay while stroking your hair because when you’re sleeping, you don’t look half as threatening as you are when you’re awake.

Freaking hell, Sasuke, I *need* to go home.

I need to get out of here.

They say that maybe, just maybe, if I start eating and stop being so sullen, then I’ll probably be out by the end of the month.

That’s great, right?

I hope you’ll pick me up, Sasuke. I guess I’ll like my mom to do it, too, but I hate how she can’t cry. She’ll just pat my head and give me some clothes and lug me home. I know for sure I don’t want my dad to come, though.

I want *you* to pick me up, okay? Please Sasuke, tell me you’ll be the one to come get me?

Or at least, come with my mom, okay? Knowing that I’ll see you after all this crap makes getting through it much easier.

I miss you.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

Sometimes I wonder what happened during that time between you asking what the heck is wrong with me and me waking up with an IV in my arm, alone in the hospital. No one told me. I mean, the only person who came to see me was my mom and hell if she knew anything.

Why won’t *you* come see me, Sasuke?

You were in the hospital too, considering that you brought me here. So where the hell are you?



It's okay to lie, you know. If you actually, for once, respond, I mean. I won't mind if you tell me that you've been bedridden because you've seen a teddy bear that you just *know* I'll love but while trying to get it, some big, bulky, fat guy also wants to get it for his pregnant wife; the two of you got into a giant brawl that could've lead to two scenarios.

It's either you've ended up being beaten so badly you couldn't get out of bed, which I know won't happen, or that you've been banned from the hospital because of the fight.

Either way, it'll satisfy me.

But then again, anything from you will satisfy me.

I don't get why you haven't written back to me, much less visited me. I mean, Ino and my mom visited me, Kakashi came by to drop off a box of chocolates, so where the heck are you?

Well, in any case, Naruto came this morning. He said he didn't have class until noon so he stuck around for an hour or two. We just sat in the lounge and watched Jeopardy. I got all the answers right. It's funny how Naruto couldn't get anything at all.

I still have my intelligence, you know, despite all the shit I've done. I guess my brain cells are just that impervious even against the drugs I've taken.

To be honest, being around Naruto reminds me of the old times so much that it almost depresses me.

But don't worry, Sasuke. I won't let something as stupid as nostalgia hinder my chances of finally getting out of here. I miss you too much for that.

We should go out for dinner when I get out.

You'll be proud of me, Sasuke. I eat three full meals a day now. The doctors all think I've conquered my eating disorder, and the idea of seeing you again has been keeping my spirits pretty high. I think all I need is one more good assessment, and finally, I can see you again.

I'm really excited.

I hope you are too.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

Naruto came by again. I told him that I'll be discharged in three days and asked him to tell you just in case you didn't know. Knowing Naruto, though, you probably won't know until you get this letter.



He doesn't like to talk about you for some reason—same with Ino and Kakashi and my mom. Whenever I bring you up they all just go silent and change the subject.

I don't get it.

Are you seeing someone? Is that why they won't talk about you? Are they trying to save me from the pain of finding out that you didn't wait for me, Sasuke? What is it?

It's getting pretty annoying, you know—just like these freaking walls.

They still piss me off whenever I see them, which is *always*. The fucking white, light-dependant walls—I feel like they're going to close in around me, Sasuke, and it's kind of scary.

You used to call me annoying. It's probably the first thing you're going to say to me when I get out, I'm sure. You always call me annoying, but I see through the insult, you know. You can never fool me. And also, that time I said I loved you and all you could manage was the usual "Hn", don't worry, I understand it.

I miss you so much.

I really wish you'll come by at least once before I leave. It'll be nice to think back on this stupid rehabilitation and know that you visited.

Where *are* you, Sasuke? Has your dad been drilling you over your marks again? You should really just tell him that you don't want to enter the police academy, you know. It'll make you happier and will take a lot of the strain off your relationship with him.

Or maybe it's *you* who's drilling the marks. Oh, Sasuke, please don't tell me you've forgotten what I always tell you about overstressing yourself.

I hope you don't turn out like me, or at least, make the same mistakes I have done.

Shit, I really, really hope you fix your daddy problems so you don't end up in a goddamned hospital like me. The food sucks, the company gets annoying after a bit and the walls are just *there*.

I can't wait to see you again, Sasuke.

We'll be good together this time, okay?

I change my mind about getting some drugs. I only want *us*. We can take it slow and steady and fall in love all over again and it'll be amazing, Sasuke. It'll be me and you, always.

Wow, just three more days.

I'll see you then.

Love.



Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

You didn't come.

Where the heck are you?

My mom didn't come either. Kakashi came to pick me up, but he's my uncle so of course he came. He said my mom had to deal with a client, Ino and Naruto were in school and my dad was just being my dad.

He didn't mention you though, so I had to ask.

It was really weird, Sasuke. He said you died.

I don't get it.

"That's not very funny," I told him. I was really pissed. That wasn't the sort of joke a person would want to hear after getting out of rehab. I would've tolerated a "my, Sakura, did you gain weight?", but telling me you *died* was not laugh-worthy, even for an idiot like Kakashi.

Kakashi, that insensitive bastard, persisted though. I didn't freaking understand. Just why the hell was he pushing it?

I don't like this, Sasuke.

Where are you?

I'm not going back to school until the next year starts. I guess it's too late, huh? Maybe we can go get our books together, okay?

It'll be nice, I promise. Don't worry, I won't make you carry them for me.

I can't wait to see you.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

I'm at home now. I eat three times a day and even a snack or two, and I smile a little. I've written my dad a letter since I think I've gotten pretty good at them.

Oh, and your brother came by. It was weird. He returned all the letters I sent to you, and oddly enough, they were all still in their envelopes. Sasuke, I'm really confused.

He said you died.



I told him to go screw himself and called your cell but it said the number was no longer in use.

You're right, Sasuke. Itachi *is* a complete bastard.

He kept telling me you were dead so I told him to get the heck out.

Sasuke, he said you got into an accident. He told me that when you were driving me to the emergency room that night, you were hit by a drunk driver. And that I got to the hospital because an ambulance came for us both. He said *that* was how I really got there.

Itachi's just lying right, Sasuke?

He's just being cruel. I know it.

You're *not* dead.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

I visited your grave today.

Naruto brought me. Apparently, Kakashi and Itachi told him that I refused to believe you were dead. They said I couldn't accept the fact that you're gone.

It's so surreal; seeing your name imprinted on that piece of stone, standing on top of your rotting corpse. The only reason I can still write right now is because it's barely sunken in.

You're dead. What's up with that?

It's my fault, isn't it?

It's my entire fault.

You were driving me to the hospital because I was such a self-centred little bitch. All I ever thought about was myself and my issues. God, Sasuke, I miss you. I miss you so much.

I cried, if that makes you feel better. I cried a lot. I cried so much that my throat hurts and my eyes are puffy and my cheeks are red. You probably don't appreciate that, huh? I doubt you'll like some stupid little girl sobbing all over your grave.

Well, will you look at that? It's sinking in. Sorry about the tear drops on the paper.

Sasuke, I can only hope you forgive me. God, I'm so sorry for being so screwed up and problematic and the cause of your *death*.



I want to tell you one more time that I love you.

I wish I can see you again.

I miss you, Sasuke.

Love,

Sakura

Dear Sasuke,

So I think I've come to a conclusion.

I'm going to be a better person from now on, okay?

No more drinking, no more smoking, no more of that complete shit. I'm going to focus on my studies, maybe do a little community service here and there, and hopefully become a doctor.

A surgeon, to be more specific.

After I'd accepted the fact that you're gone, I talked to Itachi. He told me you died in the middle of surgery. I didn't ask for the details because it hurt—still hurts—too much.

I'm going to save people, Sasuke. I'm going to save them for you.

I won't let anyone go through what I am right now. No, I'm not going to let that happen.

You know, sometimes when I close my eyes, I see you—and it's painful. It's like hunger. Remember when I was an idiotic anorexic? It's excruciating to just open my eyes because I should eat to live.

Now, it just feels like it aches to breathe because I need *you* to live.

I'm coping though, Sasuke.

If you see me crying, I know what you'll say. You'll tell me I'm annoying, right? I wish you'll do that, though. I wish you're sitting beside me now, telling me to stop crying because I'm annoying you.

I love you so much I can't even stand it.

Thank you, Sasuke. You didn't read my letters but you were *there* for me. You were what got me through that time in the hospital.

I miss you.

I'll never forget you.

Love,



Sakura





Once upon a time, there lived a determined boy who sold his heart and soul in his quest for vengeance and a determined girl who transcended mediocrity in her quest to reclaim him from his demons. In all the countless renditions of this two lives' convergence, no matter what adversity tore their hands asunder, the red thread of fate always led them back to each other's grasp. Be it in the smart, well-polished halls of your average high school or the labyrinthine, decaying streets of a post-apocalyptic ghost town, these stories of dramatic twists, serious life questions, and, of course, epic romance, come together as fractured fairy tales.



Ad Astra

So if it's raining..."

Her words are like indelible ink that paints images in his mind, creating sporadic halos with varying shades of unknown pastels.

"They won't meet again for a year?"

For once, he does not let his acerbic words lash on her naïve, little question. He does not have the heart to do so as she raises her crystalline-clear green eyes to the sky, a solemn contemplation on her face.

stockton california | late august | 1941

He was drifting, mind half-awake and his body refusing to wake up from the stray, gentle raindrop that fell on his brow, dispersing to form wet trails down the bridge of his nose.

But when he half-opened his eyes, he stilled, noticing that it was actually moist and cold fingers splayed, tracing the curves of his face.

His blurred sight registered a small, pleased smile curved above a round chin.

And before the action was fully registered in his mind, he moved.

His hand shot out to hold the delicate wrist in a vise-like grip.

Trained first to subdue before asking anything, with a painful twist, he was about to tackle the intruder to the ground when a startled cry pierced his ear and a frantic kick hit his shins. His sleep-addled mind cleared with the rush of blood, now overwrought as to how someone managed to enter the place. He relied on the haunted reputation of the destroyed sanctuary to render anyone fleeing just with its sight, guaranteeing him a perfect place to hide in.

He caught a whiff of fragrant petrichor when she breathed in awe, "You're real."

An impassive half-lidded glare narrowed further. This prompted her arms to instinctively retract back to her shivering body, but he insistently held on.

"Who." Barely holding back the irritation seeping in his reply, he slowly leveled his spine, fully covering her scrawny form. "Are you?"

She seemed stunned at the intense reaction, along with the surely bruising hold.

"Sorry," she managed a muffled honest apology. "I didn't know someone was here."





Deeming it no longer necessary, he slackened his hold and managed a half-



kneel. The girl quickly scuttled on her knees about an arm's length away from him, timidly holding his assessing gaze.

His unwelcomed visitor, wearing a light colored dress two sizes bigger than her small form, was smeared with dirt. Her attire was almost threadbare, nearly classified as rags. The charred blots on her rumpled apron told him that she was working or lounging on places where coals were used to feed factory fires.

No clearer glow from his dying lantern could further illuminate her features, but he could see irises—almond-wide and spring-green—peering behind the shorn strands of soft pink. Drenched carnation hair barely reached her chin, with a few of its ends adhering at the sides of her pale lips. There was a small knapsack and a thick stack of newspapers beside the rice paper doors, her plausible quilt and pillow for the evening.

This girl, though cowering from the oppressive hush, was brave enough to break inside a deserted temple. Furthermore, despite belonging to a lower caste, her words were formal and eloquent. The phrases were spoken courteously, with faint sing-song inflections different from the usual speech.

“Who are you?”

“Sakura.”

Raising a thin brow in disbelief, he glared pointedly at the bright contrast of her near albino-like features. “You’re not Japanese.”

“My name is Sakura,” she reiterated as her bent heels tensed, ready to bolt away in case he tried to do anything. She disregarded the fact that he was still scrutinizing the odd color of her hair, the traces of soot that hid its hue still evident. “Nice to meet you. Tonight, I’ll be accompanying you and—”

“You can find your own way out,” he curtly interrupted her introduction, having no patience to spare.

“—you’re rude,” her heated response incessantly filled the much needed quiet. “This is a temple. The people from the stalls even told me that no one would attempt to enter such a place except for dire protection.”

Her tone then shifted to something that he recognized very well: a kettle making a solid accusation that his fellow pot was black.

“So you shouldn’t be here as well. Don’t tell me you didn’t see those big red letters of ‘no trespassers allowed’?”

“I own this place.”

“*This* place?”

“...”

“This place has been abandoned for months!”



“I told you to *get out*.”

His hiss terrified her as he halfway rose to his full height. The false bravado was gone, as she realized her mistake of raising the ire of a stranger in an abandoned place.

“I’m sorry!” The beggar—he thought of her as one, what with her disheveled cinder-covered appearance—settled her balance on the balls of her feet and placed her palms and forehead flat on the damp, rotten floor. “I’ll be out of here first thing in the morning.”

When she dared to meekly raise her head, he was satisfied to see that the remaining rutilant color on her cheeks was drained to ashen white. “Just let me stay for the night.”

The sad state of this hall—torn rice-paper doors, destroyed mint cotton mats, and soggy, unpolished slabs of wooden pillars—could not guarantee another perfect safe spot. He was unrepentant to turn her away.

“Please?”

He considered the decision till the seventh drop of water fell to one of the wet puddles in the room.

“One night.” He ignored the sputter of an almost-formed gratitude. “Leave when the rain stops.”

The moment she sighed in relief, he pressed the callous fingers on the short wicker. The room was covered in a dimmed screen and humid bitter air.

Positioning himself to sit against the wall again, his senses were attuned to the crinkle of papers and a shuddering, cold exhale. He waited until her breathing deepened, roughly about three minutes after he ignored her.

Resigning to a sleepless evening, he was beginning to regret the idea of visiting his ruined home.

Sasuke always dreams.

Sometimes, he sees a red full moon that is radiant like the soft sunsets in those lakes that he claims to be too young to remember. But as the years pass since that innocent little memory, the sight of the moon-sun has an entirely different meaning to him. It makes those silhouettes grow gradually, as the familiar lethargic bodies on the ground start to stand on their feet. A festering, nauseating stench of brackish canal waters cut his breathing short as he tries to hide the plies he had managed to steal from a wayward tool box. But even then, as he streaks through the encampment, his thoughts are of his old, homely manor and of the coming dust-sweeping this New Year, and won’t mother be absolutely aghast to see her front yard covered in crusting mud? Then, the darkness that falls reminds him that he has to live in this hellhole.



There is news that every foreign blood in the land of the free are suspected to be either spies or agent handlers. And since his parents are part of the diplomatic military contingent from the east, his family had not been spared from the distrust.

Like the silent credits that roll in those newly built theaters, his mind further drifts to certain grayscale six-year old memories: a rambunctious idiot boy—with a lighter shade of hair, a more luminescent tint of eyes barging uninvited in the newly mown lawn on a clear spring day. The boy cackles like there is an extremely hilarious joke; face almost smeared with bright orange paint. The midget is loud, noisy, rambunctious and irritating, yet he considers him tolerable enough to distract him from the fact that his parents had to move to this godforsaken country with his only friend, his brother, left behind.

Inside the wire fences, his father tells him to always go back to their country. Oniisan has consecrated his whole life to the glory of their race. Sasuke is a weak comparison to the pride of the clan, but he will be useful.

“So you want to be a soldier to huh?” the blond loudmouth jeers, as he pumps a fist into the air. “I’ll beat you to a pulp, believe it and you will—”

He was roused awake, a rare occurrence, by the hammering rain on the rooftop.

Holding back the need to vent a curse, he did a careful surveillance to make up for his failed vigilance last night. Exhaustion had definitely taken its toll on him; the weather had been making a deafening racket over his tiles for quite some time and it did not even wake him up.

Placing a cool palm on the cool floor, he stood on the dampening floorboards carefully. Ignoring the frigidity in the morning, he slowly gained his balance. The crumbling, faux blanket—a year-old broadsheet, creased at his movement. Another bunch of crumpled wide papers were neatly piled at a distant corner; there was no sign or hair of his strange...guest.

Pleased, he started dusting the wayward splinters off his fitting-blazer that served as his cushion for his short, interrupted slumber. Closing the last of the brass buttons, he emerged out of the open shoji doors with the leather bag on his hands.

He was expecting this murky, rainy day spent in contemplation, on how to hitch a getaway from this continent without being detected. But then, soft foot falls clambered up in the stairs.

There was a satisfied little hum on her lips till she raised her head, finding him standing on the entrance.

“Ohayou!”

Her name was...Sakura.

Sakura, he remembered her name; it greatly bothered him since inconsequential pieces of information were usually below his notice.



The girl was now beaming with that memorable first smile, but there was already a big difference from her last appearance. She was no longer wearing her sad excuse of a clothing; instead, she was donning a decent, clean overalls—though, it was splotted with rainwater stains. Her roseate tresses were hidden, kept in place with a baseball cap—the one that hung from the old coat hangers in the storehouse premises. Her eyes, only visible enough when she held her head up high, were covered with her hair that could have passed as dark strawberry blonde, assuming they were dyed.

From a distance, Sakura would be mistaken for a small boy.

She then began to rattle off in a rapid succession with her heavily accented English.

“I explored for a bit. There was a small well filled with water. It was clean enough to use for a wash. I saw some extra clothes around here, too.” She was depositing a long strip of kerchief, burdened with a heap of fruits on the low-lying porch as she took a seat. He was sure that she gathered those either from the nearby thicket of woods, or the small gardens at the edges. “People down town loved to talk about how eerie this place was, so I thought this was the best place to hide in. I was going to do what you asked, to leave you alone, but—”

Tuning out the uninteresting blather, the only thing that registered to his mind was this: this girl stole them.

And worse, it felt like a refreshing change from the consuming silence.

“—picked them from the nearby bushes outside. I’m not sure if these are edible. And I keep seeing that *everywhere*.”

She pointed to the small, neat line of engravings on the sides of the doors, at every lantern and pillar in the vicinity. Both of their gazes strayed on the faded red-white symbol, a fan, over the surface of a once brightly painted blue wall.

“I recognized it on your collar last night.” There was contemplative pause, as she looked at everywhere but him. “I thought you were a vengeful guardian ghost.”

She failed to continue the last syllable, her throat closing with that palpable fear; her hands went behind her, fingers knitted together anxiously.

“This.” He finally caught her skittering doe, green eyes. “Was my family’s property.”

Sakura opened her mouth again. And she was probably going to ask something that was insensitive or ridiculous, because she opted not to speak and closed them rapidly with a snap.

His glare almost snarled the words out *thank you for not prying*.

i was curious. She did not wobble, but the lip caught between her teeth said it all.



A lone rumble of thunder broke the silence.

His lips thinned, forming a grimace.

“I can go tomorrow. It's safer to travel by the roads in the morning.” There was a forced conviction in her voice, trying not to be intimidated in his presence. “But can I stay somewhere else. Away from this hall if you want. There's a ruined house behind the shrine and I think that'll be enough. And what do you like?”

He stilled for a minute, as he recognized the small circular fruit on her package.

The doubt must be apparent in his movements, because she took one and bit on its flesh.

“There's a lot of food around here. I got some nuts—”

He picked the tomato in her hands. With a critical eye, he inspected the surface before he bit into it slowly.

“Do you want some salt to go with it?” A cracked porcelain dish filled with the said condiment was put in between the boundaries of their personal spaces. “Yurei-san?”

He deemed it more convenient for him to give his name. Besides, she had been polite the entire time; it was perfectly fine to be polite as well.

“Sasuke?” There was that odd little smile again. It did not reach her eyes but it definitely suited her because it made her less vulnerable. “I like you.”

Used to out-of-the-blue compliments from random strangers, he ignored her casual declaration.

Her timid shell was almost gone by the time she realized that he could tolerate her chatter. “Sasu-chan?”

A muscle on his mandible twitched. Ridiculous.

“On second thought...” She noticed his annoyance and tried, in vain, to hide her mirth. Yet the tone of her voice had an unnatural lilt to it, like it was placating him not to lash out. “Sasuke-kun might be better.” She paused for a while, slipping off her larger left sandal with a slipshod wiggle of her foot to the ground. “That's a uniform you're wearing.”

He did not confirm anything, purposely masticating the soft fruit slowly.

“You can ask me questions, you know.” Sakura was probably thinking that the morsel in his mouth was already too mashed, as she stared at him with a tiny exasperated pout.

He was impressed that not only was she skilled enough to sense that he was avoiding her little get-to-know-you talks, but she was also obstinate enough to make him talk.



The first question on his mind was *why don't you leave me alone?* But he was more inclined to let her lead the conversation. Which was a good thing, since she seemed to know what he wanted to ask when she spoke.

“And before you complain about me not leaving, the storm won’t let up. I was really going to leave earlier, but...” His companion flit a fidgety side-glance, before she relaxed and spoke out again, “You were sleeping. I just can't go with you alone here. I didn’t have the heart to wake you up because you were too tense to sleep yesterday. And I was wondering how long you’ve been staying in this place. Or why you’re even here when the whole thing is...wrecked.”

It did not made any sense to him, her worry for a boy she did not even know—someone who insisted her to leave and treated her brusquely. He found her concern ludicrous, foolishly, naïve, and gullible.

It was something that would definitely kill her someday.

Grasping at the straws, she tried again to keep a jovial air. “You go to school?”

“Hn.”

“Ah.” There was another awkward pause. Sakura probably had a hard time getting used to this arrangement, or was tired of it, because she just kept on speaking. “Can I stay here again for the night?”

“Hn.”

“The rain will stop tomorrow, probably before dawn.” It was slightly disturbing that not only did his reticence fuel her even more to know him, but she could also read him fairly well: this strange girl already placed the tomatoes on his side of the spread cloth, chosing to eat the pears instead.

“This time, I'm going out before morning.”

He inwardly thanked the deities.

“I'm going to wake you up, Sasuke-kun.”

“You can speak Japanese.”

“Is that even a question? But still!” And the trace of her apprehensive nature disappeared when she made those stupid, little clapping motions, followed by an amused sass, “I was beginning to think that you’re sick. I had to keep following your nonverbal cues.”

Sasuke scowled. He wished that she did pick some rotten ones.

“I learned to speak a bit when I was on board the *Hikawa Maru* for a month. The crew was very nice to me, but I didn't have time to learn how to read. But I wish I did.” Absently, her fingers played with the threads at the edges of her frayed sleeve with interest. “I heard they are very suspicious of foreigners right now. I can’t blame them.”



For a while, neither raised the unspoken implication of her words. It was very unsafe to stay here any longer.

“...Did you go to school as well?”

There was something mysterious in her laugh, like the question was something she had never heard of.

“Maybe.” There was a glint of teasing in her eyes. “You might find out.”

He felt like her response skirt around his question. Without further ado, he merely frowned and declined her offer.

Later that night, he allowed her to sleep near the porch.

The first gentle bars of sunlight bled crimson beneath his eyelids.

“Hey.” The rustling of fabric and the scuffing of feet told him that she would be beside him any second. Before he could even decide to pretend, she spoke again, “Sasuke-kun, no one sleeps with such a stiff back.”

Her hair was still enclosed by the large cap that almost swallowed her forehead, but he could make out highlighted rose tints at the edges. A collection of dust motes surrounded her—like small fairy lights, he could describe them if his thoughts were a little fanciful or disjointed.

Mistaking his silence for puzzlement, she exclaimed, “Are you sure you’re going to be alright here?”

She withdrew her outstretched greeting to execute a surprisingly, perfect bow: her back leveled with her slender waist, her head in an angle lower than her neck, and her limbs in a perfect straight line.

Shuffling her worn sandals, Sakura went past the cracked faces of the lion-hounds that stood as sentries to the once-grandiose temple. When her form was beyond the decaying logs of *torii*, he saw an unfurling line of smoke in the distance. It snaked its way past the wool-white clouds, stark against the pale blue horizon. Skipping the stairs one step at a time, she then waved back enthusiastically.

If he strained his eyes for a moment, he could see the backdrop of towering charnel chimneys, red-brick roofs, iron refineries; it was a sign of a teeming, busy life.

Slinging the leather bag on his shoulders, he followed her in a languid, relaxed walk. Easy long strides quickly covered the distance of her sedate pace, and soon enough, he was already in front of her. The curious glance behind him seared, focused on the bottom of his flushing nape.

He stiffened in response, oddly knowing that her smile widened a few notches.

Fortunately, she did not ask when he led the way.



Treading a dirt road along with the busy afternoon crowd in a local commercialized district, Sakura continued to twirl the strings of the small leather purse on her finger, trying to ignore the eyes that peeked from the open stalls.

“If we’re going to the port, we’ll need money.” She was again in a whimsical mood, her smile a tad lighter, less anxious. “I don’t like it either.

“So, as I said Sasuke-kun.” Her obliging tone was teasing, as they walked leisurely, taking the small alleys behind the industrialized city to hide in the shadows. “It’s easy to play twenty questions. We’ll be together for awhile so it won’t hurt if we get to know each other, right?”

where did you come from came first to his mind, but it was not in any importance so he settled for *where are we going?*

“Mmm.” Shuffling the pebbles at the sidewalk, she responded casually, “Somewhere in the Pacific.”

He focused on that. She knew how to go there without being detected in the ships? Sasuke tuned to her words again, more attentive than before. “It’s too dangerous, though. I was going alone, but having you...we can still manage, but we’ll definitely have a hard time.”

He contemplated whether to keep the question quiet or ask it. Curiosity won when he gleaned that it was more rational to gather more information out of her.

“How can you leave this country?”

“Can you tell me one of your dreams?”

“I don’t have one,” he answered quickly, managing to lie with a convincing neutral expression. But he was still somewhat bewildered with her line of questioning. “How?”

“It’ll be a piece of cake, once we’re there,” she responded easily as her next inquisition became more obstinate in pressing the matter. “Why don’t you have any dreams?”

“It’s an ambition.” He paused for a second, deciding to be instinctive this time with his next question. “...Is your hair real?”

“Yes. I bet that’s been haunting you for the past days.” She gave him a small quirk on the edge of her lips, skipping a hump on the cemented road. “An ambition, can I ask what it is?”

He clammed up. She had no right to know that.

“I get it, too personal.” An exasperated groan was out after ten seconds; afterwards, she rolled her eyes. “So where were you studying?”



“Military school.” He didn't say that the academy did not find him trustworthy.

Sakura stilled and looked at him with that incredulous fear in her eyes. “You're enlisted? In the army?”

“No.” There was a sudden bitterness that he failed to hold back. Stupid woman.

“Ah, I thought so.” Her smile was too brittle, too anxious. “You're too young.” He resisted snapping at her that age never mattered in battlefields. “And you don't really have to answer.” Halting a few steps behind him, she managed a friendly light tap on his shoulder. “Just skip the questions if they're too personal, okay?”

“Can you take me to Japan?”

He went straight for the kill.

“Kanegawa Prefecture.”

She paused for a while, then gave a cautious *why*.

“Can you?” He shrugged, giving away nothing of the bubble of anticipation in his chest.

She positively beamed, cheeks flushing and nodding sincerely.

“I'll take you there.”

It was not the first time Sasuke had camped outside the safety of his home, but when his company nervously and annoyingly chirped, it made the whole thing almost unbearable. Sakura circled this particular area for the nth time, with her more-than-your-average size forehead being slapped by her hand, as she continued muttering to herself about perfect warm places.

He had enough.

“Stop.”

Sakura halted at mid-stance.

“I can sleep anywhere.”

“Well, I don't believe you.” She then began waving with an exasperated sigh. “You look like a woman who had never slept out of rough times. And we can't just sleep anywhere, we're in someone's territory—I'm not sure actually, maybe? It's a nice place and but it's better if we sleep somewhere...closed off.”

He glared at her offhanded insult. Sakura seemed to have forgotten where she had found him the two nights before. In his opinion, she was more likely to be scared in the dark than him. Constantly bothered by her trying-to-be-in-control attitude, he gave his indomitable command.

“We can sleep here.”



“Here?” There was a petulant pout. “Not here!”

“There is enough cover when morning comes.” He stood beside the thick oak trees and the brambles, slightly exhausted but still immaculate even with his worse-for-wear uniform and leaf-strewn hair. “And we’re staying here until before the sun rises.”

“What if there are snakes?” She then sharply added, “Or frogs?”

He sat on the damp earth as a response.

“Fine,” she grumbled as she scooted over to a far distant corner, finding the softest bark she could lean on for the night. “Can you deal with the crawly creepers?”

“Just stop being annoying.”

On the third morning, Sasuke was not enjoying breakfast.

Well, if it was any comfort, he thoroughly enjoyed her expression when she saw the wriggling mass of grass snakes.

Yet, by the time she had gathered her scared wits, Sakura managed to bash its skull with a large stone and a furious yell. After her minute-long staring at the grimy remains, Sakura asked shakily if he had a knife.

There were a few stirrings of pity in those lidless reptilian eyes, giving its phantom hiss from its mangled forked tongue as it was being skinned.

“It’s either this or rat meat. I’d rather die in snake venom than disease-ridden pest.” Her gleeful beheading made him almost flinch, as she now skewered the flesh on a few shaven sticks and added a bit of stolen salt to the meat. “As long as we avoid its fangs and cook it thoroughly, it’s going to be alright.”

“You’ll be surprised that they taste like fowls.” Sakura was obviously enjoying the traces of discomfort on his face. “And it’s actually healthy. More preferable than eating wild mushrooms. Maybe if we’re lucky, we’ll get to eat some rabbit. Now those taste sweet; they have a delectable nutty aftertaste—”

“Sakura,” he finally spoke clearly, irritated at how noisy she was being. “We’re not going anywhere with this.”

She became silent, the occasional bird chirp and quiet crackling of fire punctuating another bout of silence.

An exasperated frown marred her usually animated expression as she slid back to her bag a portrait that had three well-worn creases. It was of a woman in her late twenties with dark-shaded astute eyes, thin lined eyebrows, and a stern mouth. The light-colored hair was short and bound in a tight bun, hidden carefully beneath a soldier’s beret. But Sakura told him that the major—he could see that on the pins on her chest—



always wore her hair down and tied them to two low ponytails that reached past her waist.

“Camp Nichols,” she said to herself, unaware that he was still following her lead even when she said that they had to spread out for a while. “Or Camp Murphy. Nichols Airbase is definitely nearer, but the General HQ is most probably her station—”

He would never know why, but this time, her attempt for a distraction irritated him.

“Do we have a place to stay?”

“No.”

“We have to find one.” There was an incoming gripe at the way she rolled her eyes. “Again, I don’t have any money.”

“We can sleep outside,” he offered.

“That’s very amusing. Of course, we can deal with that if it’s not going to rain tonight!” Sakura mocked with a scowl that she must have imitated from him. “It’s just luck that we’ve had clear skies these past few days. And I know my luck. By the moment we settle under a tree in the park, we’ll be swathed with insects, or blown by a storm, die by blood loss, hypothermia—”

Her tirade went to a halt when Sasuke broke to a faster pace.

“Wait up!” Her small stature managed to catch up with him, panting slightly. “Where are we going?”

“Finding a place to stay.”

“But I told you I don’t have any money. I need to find work tomorrow.”

He was silent, yet overly conscious of the combined weight of three white-black lined envelopes, which were filled with wads of banknotes, mailed and signed by the only blood relative that he knew.

Though he scorned to use even a cent out of the condolences, if these could provide them a roof above their heads, then it was fine by him.

But a flabbergasted Sakura had something to say about their accommodations.

They stood in front of a three-storey, dingy building. There was an image of a bejeweled entertainer hiding behind a folding parasol with a coy smile, and hand-written posters of flat price-rates for couples for the late evening.

He caught the last of her low mutterings, with her face gradually flaming. “...prefer to die being eaten by roaches outside.”

“It’s only for the night.” He was inwardly congratulating himself for exacting a perfect revenge. “Or for a couple more, if we need to stay.”



“For how long?”

“Who knows.” He pressed the buzzer bell on the counter.

A string of unintelligible profane phrases would have spilled out like a rapid stream from her mouth, if the proprietor did not arrive at the exact moment.

And—infuriatingly for her, and amiably for him—he conversed with the grinning forty-year old with a pot belly about the fare he would pay for the night.

“For how many nights...” There was a reticent drawing of air, inhaling as little as possible. “Are we going to stay here?”

It was reasonable for Sakura to be scared to inhale. Their room only had a single bed adjacent to the white plastered wall, with only one window that had rusty metal frames. Balls of wispy dirt hid under the musty dresser beside the bathroom door, intertwining threads of spider silk filled every corner, and he could almost grate the hard little pebbles that rolled under his soles.

“You take the bed.”

She was concocting some reasonable protest, but he already took the chenille coverlet. The frail bed, he thought with distaste, could not even properly support the weight of a tall person, much less two individuals.

“But the room—you paid for it! You should at least—”

“And I want the floor.” The mattress appeared to be a welcoming habitat for blood-sucking critters. Sasuke would rather avoid the infestation since he was already dealing with another type of parasite.

Well, it was really symbiotic, but he was too tired to care about that.

“I just can’t have the bed!”

“If you don’t want it,” he grouched, frustrated that she was appalled with the arrangement. “You can sleep somewhere else.”

Sakura could have raised an argument *what the hell*—the words were almost out of her mouth, but she stopped and replaced it with a venomous, cloying smile. His preservation senses tingled as she gathered her off-white duffel and the complimentary towels.

“Fine.” She turned the bathroom knob, giving her acquiescence. “You win.”

The door swung shut.

The moment the splashes of the pouring water stopped, he evened his breath.



Easing the tension on his body when the hinges creaked, the clean soap and berry fragrance overwhelmed the musky odor of the room. Splatters of wet footsteps on a tile were muffled by the thin bed room slippers.

A relieved sigh and a rustling of sheets later, there was a heavy thump and an emanating warmth beside him.

“Goodnight, Sasuke-kun.”

Sasuke swore he heard her muscles stretch into a huge grin, and he found it hard to silence the groan that emitted from his chapped lips.

“You are a lame story teller.”

He merely turns his glare to the side, controlling his mouth before he bites out the words—

“You are annoying.”

She waggles a finger and raises an eyebrow cockily, then rolls her eyes when she realizes that he is looking at her like she has sprouted another nose on her head. This, in truth, is close enough to what he is thinking—next to the ‘insane girl’ label.

“You forgot to start with Mukashi, Mukashi...like what they used to do.”

“And how would you know that?”

“Let’s just say that it doesn’t feel right without it.”

port of california | beside a ferry boat| unknown destination in the pacific

“Here.”

Accepting with a nonchalant, yet graceful, catch, Sasuke scanned the papers. There was a black and white image of him when he was twelve, when his hair defied the natural laws more. With his current cowlick hair more manageable and longer, his former appearance was a bit different. He glanced down, looking at the few changed details and a false surname.

“Lowenhall?”

There was another of that nervous tick on her cheek. “First thing I blurted out. And if they ask, I’m Higgins.”

After a last flick of the translucent parchment, he gave her an approving assent. He did not ask where she got such connections—she was only sixteen years old—but she only told him, “We have to go.”



It was a quiet trek towards the station as Sakura was unusually silent. The bustling mob of commuters, conversing in a mix of native tongues, seemed enough to serve as their buffer. Right now, her dark head was inclining a bit to the bickering teen girls who were excited about a scenic route in the train ride.

He could feel an air of maturity when she was surrounded with people. Her back was ramrod straight, hands on her sides as she daintily walked on the streets with a regal tilt of her head to keep her from meeting their eyes. The contour of her shoulders would tense when someone would glance at her for more than three seconds.

(her displays of juvenility seemed to come up when she's alone with him.)

Boarding an almost filled trolley, they took the last empty space at the back row.

And this time, he allowed Sakura to take the seat by the window. Comfortable as it may be to lean on the cool glass pane, he could be gracious for once. Moreover, though Sakura knew her way around the capital, there was a plausible guess that she never rode the transit.

It was better to be safe than sorry. Let her have the place.

He crossed his arms, reclined his head and closed his eyes.

"Sasuke-kun?" Why did his name now sound tentative from her lips? "Are you tired?"

"We'll take turns," he supplied politely.

"Sure, I guess," she agreed.

He felt the whole chassis trembling, before the cogs and wheels glided smoothly forward. The sounds of the machine was rhythmic, a soporific tempo, but it was not as soothing as a lively feminine chatter.

Soon enough, he fell asleep. But it was not restful.

(this time, it starts in a familiar room. his mother usually receives the visitors here, with steaming tea and sponge cakes stuffed with red-bean paste served in a beautiful display.

but there are no visitors to entertain, or tea to offer. instead, the room is filled of men in sorted suits with black and women wrapped in slate fabrics. it is a multitude of faceless people, and he almost believes that they have lidless marble eyes, watching him relentlessly.

he tries not to look at them, tries not to spill the dust from a simple, porcelain urn.

aniki? oh god, there are sobs. but he cannot help it. where are you? but they don't answer, the human-demons tell him. heroes, they snide, don't come for a grieving boy.



he tries to calm himself. one. and two. three. he does not know why he does. there is an anger that silently cripples his senses as he wants to know why his brother has left him alone to deal with this misery. there is a sorrow that silently stabs his chest as he wants to know why his parents have to die in such a blasé way, as they seem to be not breathing as they lay on the dirt strewn ground.

he asphyxiates, wishes that he dies as he tastes burnt skin and boiling blood on his mouth. a ghostly caress on his nape, and he nearly calls out kaasan, tasukete—)

“Sasuke,” the voice mirrored his fright, but he did not give her the chance to ask.

“Your turn.” His mouth and his curt reply were both dry.

“We only got a minute before we get to the last station. Then, we can take a fifteen minute walk—”

Sakura had left him undisturbed to sleep for five hours.

Stupid woman.

“It’s going to be fair, Sasuke-kun.” It did not seem to register that she was brushing the unruly strands at the back of his damp nape, that he was not averse to her touch. “You can keep watch outside the cabin later.”

And as they were the only remaining passengers, nobody could see the faint shiver on him as he disembarked. He made sure that Sakura would never see him rattled.

“The cloud weaver and the star herder meet for the first time?” Not waiting for any response, she adds again, and he was too familiar with her now to even attempt to stop her incoherent queries, “And they fall in love?”

He does not deem it with any reply.

“And they married after that? Come on, Sasuke-kun! Don’t leave the story hanging!”

He gathers his bearings and glares.

“Then let me finish.”

She puffs an irritated sigh.

“You stopped in the middle of it. You were staring blankly.”

us navy supply cargo boat | en route to the pacific | 1941

“I did tell you the truth. I told you it’s easy.”



He could not spare her a reply, not even a disgruntled ‘*tch*’, since the heat of the ship cargo compartment was getting to him. This annoying woman did voice out her concerns (*it’s going to be hot and cramped for months.*) for about a minute yesterday, but she was now quite content about their present predicament.

(*stowaways.*)

Eating a box of *umeboshi onigiri*—it still mystified him where Sakura got them, her flighty conversations began once more. His already testy ire increased, since they would surely be discovered if her voice continued to be that—

“Stop worrying! And the engines can mask my whispers, silly.”

—loud.

“My plan is perfect. We’ll stay here for a few days.” Her explanation was not very assuring, especially with that pout before she chewed her lunch. “Then, we can sneak out at a cargo drop and board another boat. Besides, this is the last one heading for the Kiro port.”

“Northern Formosa?”

“I’m sure that I have enough...resources to get you to the mainland.” There was an inquisitive grin, before she bit on the other side of her rice ball. “We can part when we reach *the* capital. I guess it’s not hard to go to other places once we get out of America. By the way, do you speak other languages?”

There was no reason for him to deny it. “Yes.”

“You can read Mandarin, of course.”

There was a trace of suspicion about her offhanded comment.

“How did you know—?”

“Are you proficient?”

“Adequate.”

“Define ‘adequate’ first.”

“I learned the whole vernacular when I was a child,” he added absentmindedly as the edges of her eyes widened, revitalizing her countenance. It seemed conditioned to appear whenever he participated in these small talks.

“You did?” She was genuinely surprised; pausing for a second before a nibble. “Why?”

He struggled to admit a reply, “I had to.”

Finishing the last lentil, she answered his silent prompting to answer the question.



“You were reading something. When we arrived here, right? I was about to snuck up behind you, but then you noticed me and I don’t know how you did that.”

Impatiently, his nostrils flared, to some extent.

“I saw a letter pressed on the pages.”

He froze.

“I’m familiar with the characters, but I can’t read it because I’ll never figure out anything written in Chinese. I can’t even read Japanese text. Don’t *look* at me like *that*. I can’t even understand it!” A mortified flush covered the tips of her ears. “I won’t snoop on you anymore, okay?”

Relenting to her abrupt, but sincere, apology, he graced her with a nod.

“Besides...” she said flippantly, as if she was talking to herself again. “You hate me right? After I bring you to the port, we’ll find our separate ways.”

He gathered their (*hers, mostly*) mess, while she cleared the rest of the evidences that they stayed there for fifteen minutes. He did not speak, which only increased the tautness of her shoulders and the succession of sighs.

She must have self-appointed herself to diffuse any awkward silences between them. Her amiable mood was back in a flash as she continued their unfinished conversation, “I noticed you like homemade food, I could make some nori but—”

Sasuke never hated her presence. Sometimes the girl was exasperating, but not to point of being unbearable. He was beginning to understand that her false assertiveness and confident masks would crumble quickly in the private of places and lengthening hush.

Sasuke envied that simple courage, when she took the first step to reach out and break the cold silence.

“I kind of envy you. I always wanted to learn other languages. Hey, can you speak conversational Chinese? Can you? Just a word please? So I won’t worry if ever you got lost or something when we—”

Sakura reminded him of many distant, familial things right now: of homemade lunches, easy conversations, and expectant gazes.

Comfortable.

Welcome.

And as she continued to beleaguer him in hushed murmurs, he saw that she was happy. Sasuke never made anyone happy before.

Amazed with this realization, his mind was blank when his mouth traitorously moved in the midst of her pestering.

“*Wo xi huan ni.*”



She blinked, her mouth pausing for a moment.

Okay, he admitted that—begrudgingly, he would add. So that was why he was reluctant to tell her that he appreciated her presence.

Let her mull on that one.

Sasuke expected a different reaction: she would tilt her head a little to the side, with those pale brows knitting on top of her penetrating gaze, and then stew for awhile, before she'd start badgering him for what it meant.

(like what his mother did, as she tried to understand why he preferred tomatoes every dinner.)

Instead, she sharply inhaled through her mouth, as if trying to hold something back from bursting.

Sakura almost *laughed* at him.

“Oh, *Sasuke-kun*.” His name was imminent to be swallowed by a ripple of giggles, but she only grinned. “*Wo shi dao*.”

He blanched.

Sakura was still not content, though.

“*Ni hen ke ai*.”

And to add some rock-salt to a painful injury, a feather-kiss (*lightly, he could not even feel its heat*) grazed his colorless cheek.

“I thought so.” There was an unfamiliar, fluid voice that roused him from sleep.

Sasuke vowed to himself silently when they emerged from the compartment of a young pale-haired boy.

At times, the little street mouse was clever and smart, but to him, she was still very stupid and too optimistic to believe that they would stay undetected in this large supply ferry boat.

“Don't look like I'm going to throw you off the plank there, pretty boy,” said the young man, as he produced the same tickets they had, obviously fake. “You absolutely underestimated the security around here.”

The pink-haired girl chose this time to wake up, drowsily making her way towards them. “Sasuke-kun, what's with all the noise?”

“Japanese, eh?”

This blinked the last of her sleepy countenance, looking at the sailor in alarm. The bright violet eyes glinted menacingly as he eyed the both of them, his odd white hair with blue highlights tied neatly behind his nape.



“You’re not supposed to be here.” There was a menacing brogue as he continued, “Tell me why I shouldn’t tell the captain to turn the ship around and deposit you to the nearest camp.”

Sasuke was not intimidated though, even if Sakura was half-bristling at the side. Weighing in the possibilities that they might get imprisoned the moment they arrive on land, he kept his best neutral expression.

There was a careful glance at the both of them, scrutinizing their appearances.

“How old are you guys?”

“Fourteen.” That was a half-lie.

“Fucking youngsters,” the sailor mumbled, putting a hand over his forehead in a slap.

“Please, sir don’t turn us in and—”

“You brats eloped?”

Both of them blinked.

“Ye-Yes,” Sakura squeaked out in surprise.

Sasuke wanted to ask how on earth this freaking moron landed on that conclusion, but he did not bother to rectify Sakura as he saw the sailor—who was probably a year or two older than them—looking at them with a little bit of sympathy.

“So you caught the culprits then, you moron? I told you that they’re here somewhere in the—”

The young man groaned as a ginger-haired woman appeared stomping her way towards them.

“My....” The sailor rolled his eyes when the newcomer went to them with a predatory glance at Sasuke. “So these people are our...guests?”

“Stop flirting with the kid, red. He’s underage.” The drawling statements startled them. “And I already knocked you up.”

“And you stop being shitty.”

“Who’s being shitty?”

Sakura looked at the bickering pair with what was close to wonder.

“Karin.” Her gloved hand combed through the messy, vibrant red strands in disdain. “And you, girl with a big forehead?”

There was something different in Sakura’s response. At first it looked like there was a demon about to attack Karin, but then she stopped herself and gave the woman an almost melancholic grin.



“Sakura.”

Some nights, he dreams of the night long lectures with his brother. Leo, he remembers of a particular impromptu discussion that has started while he is perched on Itachi's back, with small limbs attached to him tightly while climbing up the winding steps to their house, seen at the Far East in the Northern Hemisphere at the start of spring. It's best seen during the end of summer, as the resting lion comes in a form of a sickle-shaped figure.

The topic is uninteresting for his young mind. You can trace the constellation, as either the lion resting or the lion walking proudly on the sky, depending on the perception of the viewer. But still he listens, because it is his brother who is talking. It is even rare that he is teaching him about something.

Denebola, his brother points to the formed tip. When it shines, it brings misfortune and disgrace. Algieba forms the sickle or the lion's forehead. Regulus, he figures that he is nearly asleep, cuddling on a warm back, as his brother's voice fades, the brightest. It's the star of alpha leonis, the brightest star in that constellation. In its first form, Regulus is the tail of the animal but when you draw the predator on its fours—prowling on a hill, Regulus becomes the heart of Leo.

roof ship deck | en route to an unknown bay

There were stars overhead, clustered and scattered, over the night. Each pinprick of light, brilliant or waning, were arranged to form lanes, angles and intersections. They outlined people, creatures, stories and myths, crafted with a mere vivid imagination and belief.

His brother had once taught him how to navigate with a clear evening sky. Those clever, old eyes staring intently at the starlit canopy, his voice telling him that he would never be lost if he learned how to read the stars and honed that particular skill.

Sasuke felt deceived. But that was all Itachi ever did.

“If you look from a much higher ground...” There was a thoughtful tone to it before she held her opinion for a heartbeat. “It looks like a hedgehog.”

There was a brusque *plop* near his (*always breached*) personal space. Soon enough, a mop of cerise hair, covered with a navy blanket made into a makeshift bandanna (*or turban, to be honest. it was bizarre on her.*), bounced at the border of his periphery.

Sakura was not smiling. It was more like she was trying *not* to, but he was a hundred percent certain that she was plotting something ridiculous.



“That one is a hedgehog.” She pointed to a certain, almost vanishing constellation found at the farthest eastern vantage part in the horizon. “Can you see it? It’s with a bright point in the middle if you trace it like this.” Connecting the star-dots quickly with one of her sharp, feminine fingers, her comment was persistent. “It *really* looks like a hedgehog.”

He preferred his silence and ignored the inclination to correct her.

“Have you ever seen one? There are a lot of hedgehogs back at home. Those furry, spiny little rats with their long noses and—wait, I’ll draw one for you!”

She scrambled to her pockets, grabbing a yellowing map and a thin pencil. Opening the blank rear of the paper, he feigned disinterest as the granite tip began to scribble. She sat beside him cross-legged and weaved a tale about the critters she was fond of when she was a child.

“—have these pointy noses, or snout. I think. They like to burrow on grasses. Back home, I used to make some medicine from them when I caught the poor things in the wickers and you’re not listening again, Sasuke-kun.”

He was still staring with his hands behind him, staring at their endless ceiling for the night.

Sakura, as always, assumed too much.

“*You*—” she hissed like a ruffled cat, “—are a hedgehog.”

Well, if she was resorting to such juvenile tactics, he was not taking the bait.

“As I said, if you *were* listening...” Any movement beside him stilled, only the slight shift told him that she was gazing at him with a pout. “Both of you have pointy noses. Snouts.” There was a flutter of fabric as another sea breeze whipped at the deck, before she added, “And like your spiky hair, if you touch them, it’ll hurt like needles.”

He raised his arms. She tensed in preparation for a flighty escape.

And he straightened, lying supine on the damp deck, and placed his upper arms on his head.

“Both are pricks too,” she huffed beneath an angry sass, not intending him to hear.

Prod.

He successfully repressed the *yelp* as a spindle-like point poked at his right side. He jack-knifed to a sitting position instantly, glared at the one who was holding back the paroxysms of giggles.

He caught a glance of the paper, expecting some nonsensical scribbles and a poor imitation of a burrowing critter.

“Is that a hedgehog?”



“I changed my mind.” Blowing a raspberry at him, she returned back to her work. “I drew the real constellation instead, since you’re uninterested. A friend of mine used to tell me absurd stories of those stars while I taught him about what they really mean. For example, that place is where the sun usually rises—”

It was a decent sketch of a lion; the monochromatic mane was drawn in jagged points and the muzzle was almost pointed, a caricature of a majestic creature that prowled on a blunt rock in the middle of an empty grassy knoll.

“—you’re not listening again are you? I said, since you were born in July, *Leos* are *supposed* to be extroverts.” Her voice was almost sarcastic to his ears, drifting, while she pretended not notice his astonishment when she nudged him. “They’re also ambitious.”

“And quite optimistic.” A few edgier lines at the right rear leg. “Foolishly idealistic.” She deepened the frown, added a few curves on the mandible. “And passionately selfish. Anyway, how do you write your name, I can’t really—”

He knew every detail of her face, of her little, amusing foibles—

like her habit of blowing the pink hair out of her eyes when frustrated, or that she took her time savoring sweet, hard candies before cracking them. Or that she would glance a second too late whenever he spared her an eye when she was conversing with herself.

—but he didn’t really know her.

Because it eased his mind that she did not know him either.

He held her appraising eyes.

(he realized that he never wanted to know her. because Sakura would cease to be a stranger, if she answered him. when strangers leave you, it wouldn’t hurt.)

“You’re annoying.”

Crackle.

“It’s late.”

The paper was vehemently crumpled to a ball. Shoving it to his hands, he felt the barely concealed melancholy when she rose from her position.

He was going to ask what he should do with the map.

“Throw it away. It’s just a sketch.” There was a warning in her voice as she turned her back on him. “I’ll sleep in. Late. Later than you’ll ever know.”

That meant he would have to get their lunch tomorrow.

At least, there wouldn’t be any sweets sneaked in his tray this time.



The moment he could no longer feel her presence, he unfolded the little old map and read the small little note.

Regulus is bright tonight. They say that it grants wishes

He folded it carefully and slid it in his pocket.

It was probably a few hours before dawn when Sasuke woke up from his sleep, the refracting light from the lamp illuminated the woman who was sleeping soundly about three-arms-length away from him.

Her hand was on the cold floor, dry mouth slightly open. The sprawling pink curtain that covered the half of her face almost fanned on the thin, plaid sheets. Somehow—like any other night when he found her more pleasant when asleep—he noticed that her hair was trimmed unevenly; like someone held her hair back and hacked it with one swipe. There were lines, paler than her sun-white skin—(*invisible?*) scars, he thought—that were either jagged or straight, embossed by the wandering lantern light.

He wanted to trace them, those paths of her flesh, to feel the pinpricks of heat on his fingertips. And perhaps, this would reveal the stories behind them as well.

He was already closing the door when Sakura let out a dreamy sigh.

He stood again over the deck, with the turret hull towering over him. On its pinnacle, a sole orb of light pierced an illuminated path to the starless horizon as dawn approached near. A dark strip of mass was visible, surrounded by faint blinking flashes, coming from a number of docking vessels on the harbor. Despite his preference for the calm, quiet atmosphere, the silence—save for the occasional crashing of waves—was still unnatural.

There was a groan, and he found himself almost ready to spring, hand curling into an instinctive dead lock over the unsuspecting neck. But as he turned on his heel, Suigetsu had slid his back down to the ground. His head lolled, purple eyes rolling as well.

Sasuke expected the stumbling drunk to just lean over the side to let out a series of vomits, but he was surprised when he clambered into a more dignified position, sitting up straight. Then, adding to his slight befuddlement, the sailor spoke to him coherently, though it was laced with a slurring lisp.

“Sasuke,” he spoke, a stress on his consonants. “Sulking? Here.”



Shoving the metal canteen that almost broke his white nose, Sasuke had to suffer in smelling the week-long booze. It made his earlier assumption of the companion's sobriety more doubtful. Clearly, the stupid drunk forgot he was a minor.

(but then, it was not really that surprising since Suigetsu himself was barely a legible adult.)

"Cheer uuup," he hiccupped, slinging an arm over Sasuke.

Sasuke merely gave a distrustful glare and did not even move from his spot.

"What?" He had a feeling that Suigetsu had been told off by his wife, judging by the red imprint that clearly stood out on his face. "We had a fight. Fucking women..." He launched a series of grumbles, but Sasuke did not bother to listen and attempted to walk out.

"...Were you even listening? Brat," the pale-haired man grumbled as Sasuke shoved his lukewarm drink back, his fanged grin lopsided. "And you thought no one would notice?"

There was a pregnant, pensive pause.

"You're trained." It was a blunt comment as the alcohol seemed to lose all his previous inhibitions. Suigetsu, though he often kidded around, was normally careful around him. "It's obvious that you got some brutal conditioning. So, what made you leave the academy? Was it too hard? Tough life? True love?"

He merely ignored this drunken ramble; though, Sasuke had a violent urge to push this man to the sea.

"I just don't get why pinky sticks with you."

If Sasuke's hair were spines, there would have been nice little holes on Suigetsu's throat.

"You hardly talk to her, but...you were childhood sweethearts?" There was a sly grin. "I kinda get the vibes that you aren't really that close. I guess that's why that ginger bitch wants that girl under her nose. She figures something is wrong with the both of you."

There were a few slobbery gulps before he continued with his drunken lecture, "That woman is probably a cursed gypsy witch of some sort. When she talks, you can't really place her somewhere. Sakura is her name, right? See, the girl probably knows you're Japanese? Do you even believe that, her hair is freaking pink. You're probably too gullible."

There was a traitorous whisper *don't trust anybody*.

There was a healthy guffaw. "My wife asked what kind of man you are. She fancies you, that adulterous tramp..." He chuckled at the mere thought, but there was a sour frown when he gave another chug from his drink. "Well, pinky said you were a



wonderful companion, always talking how you could be sweet. Which I can't see you doing, see? You're like a stuck-up bastard. Almost like a rich kid."

"..."

"I married off with Karin, because I know what she is..." he trailed off, waving it off with his preoccupied, inebriated hand. "She's just a money-hustling babe who loves my ass and my insurance. I know what she sees in me..."

"Well, I don't know what Sakura sees in you." Suigetsu made a degrading snort, taking the last swig before he leaned his head against the post and was already murmuring slowly, "But women, hah, usually expect something..."

The sentence ended with a snore. The canister clattered noisily on the floor.

"WHAT?"

Her exclamation can wake up the dead creatures underneath the ground if it isn't for the fact that it is probably past midnight. He refuses the urge to close his eyes and just sleep. All their running around town is exhausting after all. Not that he will outright admit it, though.

"Keep it down."

"How could you be so calm when that stupid father of hers separated them? He's the one who arranged their meeting and—"

"It was reasonable." He only sighs, trying not to look pleased that she is at least listening now.

south china sea | few hours away from the port

Sakura, with all of her transparency and openness, was still a mystery to him.

What he expected to be a sulky and still snoring (*lightly*) woman on the cot across him, was actually up and causing a mild disturbance with the other passengers in the ferry. She was gone for a long while—probably about forty minutes or so—before she came up holding their meal for today, a nearly squashed orange, a bruised apple, and a warm mug shoved to him.

Fearing the worst, he sipped carefully on the chipped rim, hoping it was not the achingly sweet chocolate she favored. But it was the taste of the usual bitter caffeine that greeted him, along with her open-mouthed smile; a gentle *ohayou* almost finished forming on her lips.

As always, he ignored another ludicrous attempt for a conversation. This time, she kept on complaining how the red-head always nagged about half-finished dishes and



lecherous ugly men knocked up the kitchens to badger the women in aprons. He declined offering an opinion, as always, but sometimes she would lapse into silence, gaze at him for a second, and then start another topic. He would frequently feel her gaze on him, a palpable fascination radiating off her as she merely watched—observing him do mundane things, like something as simple as eating.

(okaasan...okaasan would often look at his father like that.)

For awhile, he thought that it was, again, him surrendering to a false pretense of peace.

“I’ve never seen such skies.” Her laugh lines and dimples were evident when the endless blue horizon bathed everything in sunlight, bright like a clear summer day. “It’s going to be a lot more humid soon, though.”

The strong scent of the detergent floated as she sat beside him.

He raised an eyebrow.

She was eating the piece of orange that she managed to get from his plate, as there were no tomatoes around in the ship. “Sasuke-kun?”

He was acting disinterested, but inclined his head a little, to let her know that he was waiting for her to continue. But instead of speaking, she seemed to wait for a moment, hesitant with her breath a little deep and too calm for his liking. Her stare zoned in to his back, like it was the only thing she could see.

When he only shifted to the side and did not move any further, she continued, “I wonder?”

“Wonder?”

There was an insurmountable amount of unsaid questions in their conversations, of what to say or what they were supposed to talk about. But she still laughed—a laugh that hitched with an almost sigh, nearly broken—like his mother who used to smile away her aching loneliness when brother left, or when father stormed away from a big fight.

“I wonder if I can stay with you.”

(i wonder if you’ll leave.)

He only gave a scoff, which was becoming more frequent than before. “You’re here.”

“Maybe.” She nodded enthusiastically. “Maybe, that’s enough for today.”

The silence and her bright, sunny smile that held on to him might be the reason he broke a rule.

“How did your parents die?” He was blunt, though the question was not said unkindly. There was no way a teenage girl would be left wandering around the world alone.



“Die?” She blinked, utter surprise on her face. “What made you think they’re dead?” Then, they morphed into a determined disbelief. “They’re still alive.”

A lump closed off on his throat, his appetite gone sour.

(deceived? she lied, didn't she? you thought she was as alone as you?)

“You left your family.” He was careful not to show any inflections on his voice.

“Yes,” she said so effortlessly that it irked him. “...I wanted to be free of them. They would never need me, anyway. Besides, when I’m alone, I can do everything I want, especially when *Okaa-san*—”

“You,” There was revulsion in his low whisper, “...are really annoying.”

“But, Sasuke—”

“Go home,” he groused, the small plate beside him rattling as he stood up suddenly. Sasuke stormed out, leaving the half-finished cup cold and the already peeled fruit untouched.

That night, Sakura watched the stars alone. She slept with the sky as her blanket.

That night, Sasuke woke up, profusely sweating. For the first time, his horror did not root from the senseless deaths of his family, but from an entirely different reason.

(coral strands. flesh lips. milk skin. water-green eyes. apple scents. wispy breath-gales. it felt like the sky.)

He wanted her.

Morning came, and Sakura, still weary-eyed and filled with longing, did not return to their bunk.

Sasuke was nowhere to be found.

“Imagine your husband is just on the other side of the river. And you just can’t cross it because you might drown. And when you work all year round, you see him on the other side. I don’t care if they say that ‘distance makes the heart grow fonder’. That is just plain cruel and—”

If Sasuke groans out to the gods, it will be because he wants to know why he has such an emotional companion.

“Your promise, Sakura.”

“Sorry.” She clamps her mouth shut with a tremulous smile on her face, waiting.

He will never know how she does this to him.



dewey boulevard | near end of malate | 1941

Sasuke realized that he has to go to the nearest land in the Pacific, which was the busy port of Manila, before sailing farther to the east. As merchant ferries, especially since they were part of the steel manufacturing companies, they were given orders to prohibit anyone to set sail directly to the land of the rising sun.

It was already mid-morning, the high altitude of the sun extremely warm on his cold and pale skin. It was about a month of aimless direction, and now he had the information on how to get out of this wretched city without alerting the navy. It was lonely, yes, but he decided that it would be better if he found the way on his own.

He leaned on the bench, watching the faint shadows trail on the floor.

“Go to the Plaza at three.”

Sasuke thought that the softly spoken invitation was only the wind playing tricks on him.

Later that afternoon, when the sun was coming down slightly from its highest peak, hiding behind stray clouds, he found himself making his way through the beautifully crafted bridge. Because he discovered where he could avail a boat that would not be questioned by the coast guards, he was in a good mood as he ventured outside the crumbling century-old walls of the capital.

He gave a small frown when the distant clock tower, crimson and vibrantly pale, said that it was already thirty minutes past three.

plaza miranda | old downtown

The festive Fridays had created vast arrays of stalls and entertainers in the streets. Various acts and painters were strewn across the small grass-covered ground in the hinterland of Hispanic houses and artifact peddlers. Lanterns of paper, in cubes and cylinders, hung from the linking cords tied to each cemented pillar, illuminating the whole area in gentle red and green phosphorous-lights as the evening drew near.

And then, he recognized the woman that attracted the crowd.

Sakura took off her usual disguise of a shabby little kid—her large caps and baggy shirts—and instead placed a thick, dark headpiece over her flamboyant tresses; a skirt made of an unusually light fabric, knitted with the most fragile threads, with strings of bells at the jut of her hips. Holed coins were dangling from the seams of her peach-colored sash, swaying at the slightest movement.

Sasuke did not know if he should turn away now and head to the opposite town, fast.



And her body moved instantly, rippling from the center of her navel to its whole. The movement became a pattern of swirls, undulating whimsical folds of silks in spirals. In each turn, her expression would alter: she would smile then grimace, and then morph into a silent laugh. He saw the graceful arcs of her pointed toes, the way her body dipped a little further to accommodate a smoother position, the stray curl of roseate escaping from the scarlet headpiece, and the way her lips twisted into a victorious grin.

Her dance was like patiently waiting for a burst of life to jump out; it made one forget that she was fifteen, guileless and imperfect. But it was her, and her eyes were as bright as the morning dew.

When Sasuke saw the blisters on her feet, the lonely smile on her face—the crowd helplessly drawn to her—he finally decided.

Notes drifted to their ears, low and fluttering; curious eyes focused on the boy with an unusually pale skin in a scorching climate and unusual gray eyes. Sitting on the nearest balustrade, he leaned beside the small tin can that she placed on the ground.

Her percussion—made of wooden frame, stretched leather skin, and silver plated zils—stopped its rhythm.

“You’re late.”

He only responded with another trill, his fingers gliding over the small windows on the old bamboo reed, gingerly pressing the tangible chords on his grasp. Closing his eyes, the small jangling coins reminded him of those spring wind chimes; and he raised a notch, prompting her to move.

Her first step began with a raised leg, followed by a grand sweep of her toe. Wrists were curved, her wax-like fingers splayed in alternate directions, distorting into smaller convoluted fans. Lithe, limber arms were above her head; in a beat, they descended to cling at each side of her waist, with elbows sharply jut out in every clap of the entertained audience. It went faster and faster like her breathing: one-two, three, four and eight to sixteen counts.

And when the music reached its final apogee, Sakura bowed to the crowd with her arms bound by the outstretched horizon where the rain of pennies came.

There was a thundering applause, a series of excited childish mutterings, a quick babble between the wandering tourists, before their little performance ended and the small fiesta continued.

They picked the scattered cents as she bit on her chapped lips and he blanked his mind. The gathered mob finally dispersed, no one sparing them a glance.

Her small smile dissipated the tight lines on her face, yet he could still feel the sting of her obvious avoidance. Slowly straightening up from their bent angle, they stood on the marble plaza with her bare feet more visible to him than ever.

“Where are we going?”



Sakura blinked for a few seconds and he nearly felt the little stirrings of panic. The mere notion of unease vexed him more, but the thought that she was about to—

Sasuke forgot that Sakura was a woman. A woman with volatile moods.

“We’re going to have a late lunch?”

It was probably later than that, he surmised, noting the change from the bright yellow skies to the combined splashes of oranges, pinks and indigos.

“Early dinner.”

“Dinner, fine.” As he returned the hard-velvet case back to his open leather bag, she tried to laugh off her unspoken queries.

He waited for her to finish stuffing the dark, damp red kerchief she used to wipe her face in her bag. Both of them were now walking on the white gleaming streets, the shouts of vendors and the smell of fragrant street foods on the air. People merely brushed past them with their few seconds-long stares, as if they were accustomed to see alien-looking performers.

“You play well.”

He turned to her and gave her time to explain.

When she did not speak, he acquiesced to ask.

“Surprised?”

She mumbled, a bit irritated as she tried to outpace him.

“I thought you were only good at one thing... aside from making my life a pain, you always did a great job in making me nervous. I was okay when you were gone, but you wouldn’t stop running around in my head—”

And she sputtered, placed a hand on her mouth, and whipped her head away from him, horrified. Her expression screamed *did I just say that out loud?*

He gave a smirk—or a chuckle, or a smile—he did not care as he left her behind to trail after him.

Before she burst into quiet expletives, a pretty flush crept to her cheeks.

near zero point | luneta | december 1941

It was rather another novel experience, occupying an ornately decorated bench in a famous park for lovers, surrounded by assorted gardens that were either designed from the far east and the west end. Currently, they haunted a particular place in the oriental area, where the white smooth stones and dark red carnations reminded him too bitterly of home (*he outright rejected the idea, but there are clearer views here, Sasuke-*



kun.). There would be a couple of different colors everywhere, either ginger-haired with the bald patched men or brown fleshed with the fair-skinned—walking around the decade-old pavements, passing by the desolate grounds.

The past few hours were spent in an... interesting spur of events. As they ate eggs (*of course they're salty, sasuke-kun, red ones are salted!*), tomatoes (*small but juicy okay?*), and dried fish (*be careful, their bones can puncture your throat*) using their hands (*isn't it dandy?*) at the town square, Sakura had taken him everywhere on the capital, telling him of her first time there, telling him that she did not mind the intriguing looks from the locals (*a foreign, eccentric-looking girl running around alone? they won't mind, sasuke-kun.*).

Sakura sat at the far corner of the stone seat, still watching the cloudy horizon with piqued interest. She was adamant to make him tell her the legends of his motherland. And because he would not oblige to such a preposterous request, she made a deal that she would stay quiet the whole night if he would fill in the silence. The offer was, of course, tempting and he accepted.

Quietly, and in the briefest way possible, he told her of the fiery sun goddess in the distant line of his blood. They were myths about a necklace, a sword and a mirror, of multi-headed snakes and the blood and tears that formed his home. But Sakura was not even looking at him, her eyes on the skies, only half-listening. It was a definite opposite picture of them, a break in their habitual pose.

Was she exacting some sort of retribution? And why was she shivering despite the extremely scorching night?

Scowling, he was about to stop when she spoke quietly, a faint flush on her cheeks.

“Do you have any stories about the stars?”

He grunted. This was very, very annoying.

“Please?”

“Why?” he said cautiously.

“Because...” And she fully turned to him, her hands entwined together as if in prayer, rose spirals cascading down her face; she was striking under the lantern lights. “I can’t see them tonight.”

There was a time that he would outright refuse such a thing. The stifling heat that coated his nape and wavered to his slowly breathing chest dulled his mind; the wind was even coaxing him to sleep.

But she stopped looking at the heavens and saw only him.

He began a tale that mother often told the little hopeful girls in their suburb, as she welcomed them kindly in their home. (oh come in, come in, *mother always loved her preschool pupils*, oh are you visiting sasuke, my, my *and she would proudly gaze at him*)



It was the story of the girl who weaved clouds and the boy who lead the stars for the lord of the sky. He told them their names, the white river that separated them, and the forgiveness that brought them together once a year with the wings of compassionate fowls. He told them to her as apathetically as he could, but it was a hopeless case for she smiled and laughed and she was content to be here with him.

In that moment, as she listened, it seemed easy to forget many things. It sounded so logical to ignore the old sounds of caterwauling alarms, the rumble of a turbine engine, the familiar grit of gunpowder on his thumbs, the probable blaze of reddening cities, the horrible screams as they died, died and *died*.

“That was a sad story, Sasuke-kun.”

She sat a foot apart from him, her feet not reaching the soft grass beneath them. There was a sad frown on her usual smiling face and a breaking heart that was almost tangible in his hands. If there was a moon tonight, her eyes would have silver on the edges.

(here, he begins to believe that he is sixteen.)

“It’s not.”

Sakura, this young girl who tried her hardest to make him happy, stared at him like it was the first time she ever saw him. She probably wanted to disagree with his words, words that she probably considered that he never meant, never would say.

(because for the first time, he hopes.)

“For them.” And with a clear finality, Sasuke closed his eyes, leaned on the cool cement behind his back, and whispered the last words before sleep claimed him, “It’s enough.”

The young Uchiha was awake, but he could not open his eyes. His spine was painfully stiff, something that he had not experienced for a long time. According to his internal clock, he probably would have slept for a good hour if it weren’t for the stray patches of faded pale blue he could see in the darkness.

He barely caught Sakura’s annoying little monologues.

“—and bruises! Were you fighting someone? Joined some syndicate?”

His mouth felt raspy. Dry. Like he had swallowed sandpaper and rubble.

“No.” Then, he felt damp. Extremely cold.

“You will tell me what you did. And,” was her nonchalant reprimand, and she was not flustering, making him nervous. “I did a sponge bath. And I did not strip you.”

He wanted to bite a sarcastic reply *you just couldn’t resist, didn’t you?*

But he croaked instead, “You didn’t have to do that.”



“Don’t tell me about preserving your virginity. I can’t risk breaking your spine if I can’t even break your fever. I’m too tired to carry you like a princess.” Her voice was angry, almost commanding. “I need to lower your temperature. Believe me, having convulsions isn’t fun.”

He tried to stand up quickly.

But Sakura caught him with an *idiot!* and a tirade summarized as *i’m going to send you to a fiery pit of hell if you don’t lie down, sasuke-kun*. She was efficient and apt to his condition, which surprised him when she began rattling off his symptoms in a frenzied, heavily accented language that he sometimes could not comprehend—wait, were they medical jargons? But thinking was difficult as her rapid tongue did nothing to assuage the pounding ache until she shoved a steel canteen in his hands.

“Here, drink this. You’re dehydrated.”

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t give me that. It’s even painful for you to move right now.”

“Hn.” She tilted his head to deliver the soothing water.

“You’re not a doctor.” (*how come you know these things?*)

“You don’t have a choice,” she retorted heatedly. “And I don’t have time for explanations. Now tell me, how long have you been feeling woozy? And don’t lie to me just because you’re suffering from a migraine.”

(*well, sorry tough guy, i’m the only one who can help. just trust me.*)

“...”

“With the way you squint, I wonder how you can still spot me.” Her hands were cold, wrapped in a damp cloth. It felt *good* as she continually ran her hands through his nape, forehead...he was really sick, wasn’t he?

Sasuke almost groaned in defeat.

“Your thick, girly lashes make it harder to see, doesn’t it?”

But instead, he glared holes at her.

“Who else would have pink hair?”

“What? Did you just—” She gaped for a while then, instead of being offended, she patiently brushed the straight tendrils that adhered to his forehead. “You’re really sick, aren’t you? Sleeping on the bench really is a bad idea. And why didn’t you tell me you’re not feeling well?”

He grunted.

“You’re shivering.” The damp rag—it was her white dress, the one she wore when they first met, he thought wildly—was hovering over his face. She swiped it under



his nose and tilted his head to the side. He was alarmed when her hand trembled for a second before she said in a level, cool voice.

“Your nose is bleeding.”

“And that means?”

“It means you’ve been already sick for a week,” she muttered, further aggravating him because he had to make sure he would not fall when she motioned him to stand, carefully hoisting him. She held him, surprisingly firm and steady, heaving him up as she tried her best not to let their weight tumble down the pavement. “I should’ve known that you’ll die by a mosquito bite.”

Some nights, he is lost in a world where there are vanilla-swirled skies bright behind his back, shadows gone and drowning from the influx of light. A place where the buildings are like the familiar suburban he grew up in, made of mixed wood and concrete; people barely having time to walk slowly against the gray pavement. Men in strange suits and women in lethal heels splash the paints that flood the streets. Their shoulders collide in a hurry, and the familiar earth is replaced in asphalt, while he tries to listen as they speak fast, too rapid for his quick ears to catch.

It was chaotic when they entered the emergency room, brimming with the wounded who came from the Pacific.

“Can you give me his name?”

She blurted it out, unaware of the consequences, only seeing the hues of lilaceous red mix with the darkening purplish hues blotting the flawless skin.

“Sasuke,” her answer was calm, but it was edged with a frantic note that was nearly hysterical. “Uchiha Sasuke. Sixteen.”

“An Uchiha—?”

Somebody had heard, probably, other than the considerate person who had given her attention. But there were other people who shadowed her as well, congregating near her that she stepped back. Then, he was lifted off from her shoulders, the relaxing scent of water and earth gone.

He could barely register the lumpy gurney that he was being placed on and the tourniquet that was wrapped around his arm. He did not even know if the prick that pierced his hand even registered to his brain, as well as the conversations that took place.

“Why this boy...”

“—Admiral in that family, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That captain leading the troops in Indo-China is currently—”



“Please, help him.”

He could only hear Sakura’s complete sentences.

“He needs medical attention, please? I just noticed his high fever approximately 3 am. But there’s no doubt that he’s suffering from—”

There were mixtures of voices as he stared at the haphazardly patched shirt on her back. Before her were the accusing faces of men in white pristine shirts, their stone faces unmoving. It made the air in his lungs swirl in anxiety as she stood her ground, even if they knew she would eventually lose this battle.

“We are considering all Japanese citizens to be suspicious of covert activities. Haven’t you heard, girl? There was an attack yesterday on Pearl—”

“He’s not a soldier! He’s not involved with that! Will you just—”

He heard voices, panicked reports over the white, disturbing noise.

“I won’t leave him alone!”

But he could no longer hear her; and all he saw were flashes of things forgotten and things remembered. There was only ache and yet there was numbness. Then, there was pain of such blinding intensity, crippling his senses. And they suddenly diminished.

Some nights, he whispers a thank you, a you’re annoying, an I’m sorry. He whispers anything he could have said. He pretends that she hears the words, feels the warm air from his mouth and there is rain beneath his lids, for it cannot be salty and warm when she’s bitter and cold. Every time this happens, he can only conclude that this is not true.

unknown vessel |on-board |1942| j.s.t.

“Uchiha-san.”

There were neither the supposed tears nor the hand he had expected to be holding his. His eyes adjusted harshly to the glare of the white lights until he finally recognized the room: the cold white infirmary.

“We found you in a government hospital. Are you alright, Uchiha-san?”

He could not think clearly, barely discerning the white walls that surrounded him.

“You caught a common tropical disease that inflicts hemorrhaging. It usually starts with a very intermittent high fever.”



Shizune, the nametag glinted in brass as the black-haired woman walked in careful mincing steps towards him. She had a serious grimace as she opened a penlight over his eyes.

“Lucky we got you in the nick of time,” the nurse droned on, deep mahogany looking at him levelly, trying to disregard the fact that he was not listening, *damn it*. “Are you sure there’s nothing I can do for you?”

(i’ll take you there, i promise.)

“What—?” The word chafed against his throat.

“Intelligence Office received information that the youngest Uchiha has been found. The *oni gajins* had planned to take you as captive, and I believe you’re born under the lucky stars since we managed to prevent that. The capital was declared an open city and you were rescued. Actually, the US placed a bounty on you while the empire offered a reward if you were seen.”

Money.

And the words of forewarning reverberated in his head.

(women, huh, they usually expect something.)

“Sakura.”

No.

“I need to see her.” He was impatient. He knew she was here. His mind was not playing tricks on him, neither was there any chance in hell that she was only there to—

He did not dare finish that.

“Where is Sakura?”

“Who is she?” came a confused question. “Is she a relative, Uchiha-san?”

He could not answer her because Sasuke was not even sure if that was her name.

She is nothing more but a dream.

Only a few years has passed, and she is gone in his mind. The mere recollection of her is never to be brought up in the light of day as he trudges on the mud-splattered grounds and carries his rifle proudly on his hands.

But again, at night, the dream will return: a man and a woman sitting on a bench, looking at the different shades of dawn in the sky.

In his mind, he can almost hear her voice and his song of two unfortunate lovers who had displeased the heavens so much, they were punished to only meet once. She joins his song; faintly hears her humming myths of weavers and shepherds, of unfortunate lovers and once-a-year meetings.



Sasuke always wakes up, and he wishes he never does.

KOKUTAI NO HONGI

Printed in 1930s

165 pages | a small, stained pamphlet | 1943

He had read enough of that famous, well-distributed text in his childhood

Sasuke was naturally gifted. He had spent only about four years in primary school, skipping two grades at once. He was about to finish the final tenth year of his secondary school when he was summoned to be drafted into the military and be trained as an officer, to be secretly deployed in a foreign land while his parents were under the orders of keeping diplomatic liaisons with other countries. *Compatriots*, they called the groups of immigrating families who did such a heroic deed.

His father had great pride when they were chosen. So, unlike other children who still played with their toy trucks and paper dolls, Sasuke had been learning how to wield his bayonet along with the neatly finished papers of advance arithmetic, and a calligraphy of images that were almost shaped like a black winged-serpent beside his table.

But for them, it was not enough. He was never enough.

Itachi already knew how to dismantle rifles at that age.

That was why he drowned himself with the words that told of the glorious world that his blood could create if they persevere enough. It told him of a secret, of power entirely tempting to a boy who was shunned for being weak.

But belief was not enough to protect someone.

When his brother was sent to achieve his well-deserved title, he was helpless in protecting his family while they were arrested as probable suspects who sold information to their country. They ransacked their home, forced them inside a fenced wall, and people died either from malnutrition or utter depression.

Being a child, no one minded if he could escape through the holes underneath. And he vowed to make his brother regret not coming for them, only sending him enough money so he could go home.

It was already four years since Itachi went to serve the Emperor, a great honor to many. Five days after the order that all young able-bodied men of the country were being called to arms, Sasuke leaned on the porch where the moon was usually seen brightly.

There was no need for sacrifice when they were dead.

His brother was omniscient. That was his belief ever since he was a child. He still believed this, until now. But he knew that he was not invisible, the proof stood



before him: his brother grasping the edges of the stair railings, staring blankly in front. Sasuke wished that Aniki could see him again. Just one more time.

He venerated the existence of his brother, no matter how it had shadowed him all his life. *(you're itachi's brother, aren't you? shame, he had already learned those drills eons ago, uchiha-san. try harder!)* But he often waited for the day when they would recognize him.

The last time he had seen Itachi on their front porch, complete and well, was when their mother was sweeping the dying leaves off the cobblestones. His impressive figure was sharply dressed, displaying the glints of the red-gold sash that was wrapped around his torso and the assorted epaulettes that indicated his swift rise to the ranks.

Sasuke had once dreamed of wearing that white armband which held two simple characters at each end (憲), a symbolism of what he wanted to be (兵): an impeccable soldier that would uphold the law.

Right now, the person who lay almost dead on the standard white cot inside their ancestral home in Kanegawa was only a pathetic shell of what his brother once was: the thin, hollow man wore a flimsy gown stained with vomit and blood. His face was gaunt, irises fog-white; Sasuke wanted to close his eyes.

"I'm sorry." His brother managed a small smirk, his hands trembling when it ruffled his head and put a weak affectionate poke on his forehead. The barely audible apology rang so loudly in the room. A room where soon enough, after a few days, he would leave and would return to it in another form: ashes and bones, entombed in an urn. "I did not try to look for you."

He wanted to strike this man in the face, but even a soft slap to his cheek would shatter his jaw. And Sasuke was already afraid that he would be alone... *alone*.

Itachi was his only remaining blood relative, the only one who had the right to care about his welfare, *(was someone out there biting her lip as she thought of him?)* enough to leave him a cautious reminder.

"Always take everything with a grain of salt. Never believe their lies, little brother." That almost smile his older brother had infuriated him. "Never enlist in the army."

Too late.

The grooves of a forgotten emblem, engraved in the sable, felt rough on his hand.

seventh month | seventh night | seventeenth hour



He stood before a white table with three porcelain cups filled with a clear liquid that he knew was sweet liquor. Glint of the gold plate filled his sight like inviting bullet targets. The man before him, his drill officer, may be his legal caretaker, but all he cared about was to bring glory to their race.

The glint of the metal plates and appraising eyes that looked at him with pride, as he was easily inducted in the ranks, made him proud; and wondered if his brother would be proud that at least in just half a year, he had completed his training and had been authorized to lead.

Soon enough, the General entered, grim and sober but with a fierce command.

“We are the sons of the gods.” He looked at each of them, at the unseeing child eyes who only gazed beyond him. His words were spoken with bravado that the gullible would suck in quickly. “We have the right to guide them towards the path of the heavens.”

(this is your dream, isn't it?)

The porcelain had a dull gloss, slivers of the afternoon reflecting on the warm liquid.

“*Kampai!*” The men raised their hands in victory as another child drank the pleasurable, slow poison: to die through wind, fire and earth.

(cheers, sasuke-kun! be merry!)

His culpabilities fulfilled, extricated from the instant he was given the katana that was supposed to be displayed in their respective homes.

Sasuke never used the blade—but it hung on the edge of his waist every night.

12|04|1944

They questioned what was wrong with him.

As an officer, he was expected to mingle with his men and indulge in their activities. Sasuke was always the first one to arrive at these intermittent camps, filled with abducted and captured women only existing to provide comfort. But he would not take any woman for himself, only looking at their faces, as if searching.

They told him that he was a prude, thinking that just any woman would be unsatisfactory to such a man like him. They probably assumed that because he came from a noble blood and was a bachelor as well, he would, of course, tend to be selective.

But as songs filtered in the air, as men strummed their guitars, and beat the edge of their cups for their amusement, he found their reasoning rather relieving. Guttural



laughter and drunken shouts filled the air, as the uniformed men shed their coats and laid their bare backs on the ground to look at the darkening afternoon.

“That cunt I screwed last night was screaming so hard—”

“Yeah, those whores were amazing, had about five last night.”

“Taicho!” the men called to him. “Loosen up, loosen up!”

(can you tell me one of your dreams?)

Sasuke refused to see the woman they had prepared for him tonight. She was crouching behind their bamboo prison, her flesh, peeping on the gaping holes, were marked with bruises. The tortured cornflower eyes became shattered green, the bright platinum strands that were strewn all over the stained earth turned into soft coral. The tall form became lithe—

If she was a dream, Sasuke wanted to scream, why did he keep on looking for that nameless girl?

The waking nightmare did not make sense anymore as his bile rose to the edge of his mouth, nearly spilling between his teeth. Taking all the self-control he possessed, he excused himself and went back to the station. He opened his window and saw that the constellations were bright.

(make a wish, sasuke-kun!)

As a soldier, he could not wish for two things: for the war to be over (*if it was, he knew he would look for her in the rubbles and remains, dead or alive*), and for her truth (*did she really betray him? but cowards would never ask directly.*)

There was nothing to wish for.

(scared that the gods would hear, and grant them?)

He reached for the flask on his bedside.

Some nights, the sky is streaked with silvery, comet-like tears. While in the midst of splattering drops against the faux windowpanes, he knows he dreams of her voice. They flicker, as that familiar comforting alto and her bright words weave around like ink and paint on the blank canvas called his mind, images.

Her laughter creates the shades of violent pink and milk white, her whispers conjure the shades of comforting green and peaceful blue, a myriad of colors that will wake him, with a feeling that the day is left monochromatic.

nantao| china | 1945



The overpowering scent of sulfur and gunpowder seared through his nostrils as he breathed. His pistol had long been discarded; there were no longer bullets left. The blade at his side was now put to use, hacking at every limb and praying to some distant deity that he was merely giving them mercy (*a quick slice through the carotid*) and justice (*one swift decapitation*) as he granted them a quick painless death.

But who was he fooling? They were fighting a losing battle.

It was a fateful August evening (*a starless one, every night was*), a few hours before the sun rose in the east. With no moonlight to cast their way, their only lanterns were the burst of fire and sparks that outlined the borders between the earth and the sky. His platoon of three was already contemplating where to strike their bayonets—throat or gut? Which was faster?—when they were surrounded by men in a familiar olive garb, faces painted in the colors of vegetative earth.

White-bellied Americans.

From the corner of his eye, he saw his allies behind him raise their long knives, followed by that familiar maniacal glint. Grimacing, he realized that these boys—they were younger than him after all, fifteen and stupid—were opting to die fighting.

Just before one idiotically raised his arm and rushed to the enemy fray, a loud yell stopped him.

“Yamero!”

The meaning was there, but the pitch of the syllables was different. It was apparent that the speaker knew their language well, but it remained unused for a long time. The foreigner probably learned it to interrogate their prisoners.

Somehow, the thought of being in a cell sounded better than this senseless war. What was there to see anyway? Outside?

(isn't the world so pretty, sasuke-kun?)

“Soldier, I’m offering you amnesty if you surrender now. We will not harm you, as well—”

And Sasuke, in the point of misery, chuckled.

Blue eyes, familiar and now alight with recognition, widened.

He raised his hands, dropping his long sword—now blunt and tarnished—on the dust-strewn ground. Finally letting out a deep relaxed exhale, he gave a tired smirk to the astonished idiot in front of him.

“I give up,” he spoke in fluent English, before repeating it again in his native tongue, “I give up, Naruto.”



He stared blankly at the plain plate piled with yellowing mangoes in the middle of the simple low table, the only things inside the dimly lit interrogation room. It was an eye-straining shade against the gleaming brown surface, a stark contrast in the bleak gray.

The door creaked open, and Naruto entered, with his big aviator glasses perched on his face. He looked comical as he came with a recognizable pilot jacket, the nose art of his platoon—red swirls, a caricature of a bird bringing a bomber—distinct on the leather. He sat across him with a grim frown and tried hard to be intimidating.

“Name?” the young pilot (*perhaps?*) asked him.

“Second Lieutenant Uchiha”

“And you were there in Nantao?”

He kept his mouth shut.

“Are you really Sasuke?” Then, Naruto gave a hard glare. “The Uchiha Sasuke I know won’t accept an armistice being offered after the bombings.”

Dumbass, he wanted to snidely reply, *people don’t stay as children forever*.

“You wanted to surpass Itachi. I accepted that someday I would meet you out there and that I might have to kill you,” he continued, looking at the shell of the young boy that Naruto used to call as his brother. “What happened to you?”

“I don’t know.” Sasuke clenched his fist, the nails biting into his palm, but he could not feel anything. It was unfeeling and cold and he could only sense the uncertainty increase. He was never redundant in his words, but he just wanted to be honest right now, so he breathed it again in resignation, “I don’t know.”

Naruto became awkward and fumbled, thoughtful of what to say next.

When the idiot did though, the grip of an old pang returned to him.

“...Do you want some mangoes? They’re from Manila.”

Sasuke glared at the innocent fruits like they uttered some personal insult to him.

“Come to think of it,” Naruto surmised as he quietly scrutinized his supposed-to-be foe and always friend; Sasuke refused to even glance at it the whole time they were observing his actions through the two-way mirror.

“I went to Manila when the General went there. They had great food.” Sasuke returned his edged stare to Naruto. “If you go there, can you help me look for someone? It’s easy to fall in love with her. Even if you’re a prick, I doubt you won’t be enchanted. Pink hair, almond-green—”

And unconsciously, his body moved on its own accord, he grabbed an astonished Naruto by his open vest. The black-haired prisoner did not hear the clatter of the plate, nor the distant panicking shouts behind the mirror as they tried to open the



locked door. They were calling his blond companion with *you blockhead! why the hell would you lock yourself inside with an enemy?*

The last Uchiha only roared, in desperation and misplaced anger, three words.

“Where is she?”

Uzumaki Naruto—long time best friend of this broken young man—was astonished as Sasuke shook him, teeth gritting and stare aflame. They were not the same eyes that were guarded, distant and unsure. They held more blaze, a desire to know where the girl was, that it made him believe that any answer that he would give Sasuke might make or break him.

And because everyone believed that Naruto was a thick-headed idiot, many underestimated his perceptiveness.

“Wait a minute. Why are you—that reaction. ... You’re... white skin, hair as dark as night...”

Blue eyes widened.

Sasuke, even though he was humiliated and forced to surrender, never felt so embarrassed in his whole life when he heard those words coming from the said dead-last.

“Something like that, she used to tell me that you were like a dark cloud, *Yurei-kun*,” Naruto spoke as if he was listening to an old anecdote, told before the dying breeze in a dusty, humid land. “The one who herds her stars. She refused to give any name and Haruno-chan—”

“Haruno,” he spoke in deadpan.

The blond pilot nodded, his grip loosened. “Haruno Sakura, Why? Didn’t you know her name? Are you sure it’s Sakura? Pink hair, bright eyes, great dancer. Cool. And Scary. You still don’t know? The last thing I heard from her was a few weeks before the massacre in Manila. She was still waiting for you. But I can’t let you off that easily, Uchiha. You are still a war criminal—”

But he did not hear anything Naruto said, who was now fretting on how complacent Sasuke could be as he cooperated to divulge even the secrets of his meet-point and his prying questions.

He merely nods off on the bench.

Sakura cannot believe him! He is impossible!

She stares at him carefully, looking at the gaunt face, the shadows that paint it and the eternal frown that adorns him. It does not even mar his beauty, it even exemplifies it. However, his superficial perfection can only be at par on how imperfect he is inside.

She can die for this man.



And that thought terrifies her.

Sakura is an outcast in her own race, because of a superstitious belief that as a snow-skinned and coral-haired infant, she is bound to be cursed. As the odd child among the growing family of mahogany strands and tanned flesh, she is fated to be forsaken and left alone.

She loves her family. She loves them even if they are tricksters, thieves, and travelers. Who will love them, these shunned Romani, but their own flesh and blood? Yet she is the ostracized one among the persecuted people, tempting her to do unspeakable things to betray them, because she can no longer stand this bout of loneliness. In the end, before it has escalated to who will strike the first blow, she deems it logical to run away and live her life as she sees it fit.

Her feet have carried her everywhere. She has been taken care of by many people, learns a lot, knows a lot by the time she is ten. No one will probably believe what she has seen, but all she knows is to run. To escape from her family, from the other side of the world; to escape from the ones who want to purge the world of scums like her.

But now...

She leans on him carefully, settling her head on his warm shoulder, letting sleep claim her. It is the deepest part of the night and as the lantern light above her head flickers shut, she finally sees the river of white that separates the heavens.

“You’re right. It is enough.”

She drifts her fingers to smooth strands that fall over his damp forehead, easing the furrow of brow. Blowing a tender touch of a kiss on his forehead, she then closes her eyes.

“They will be okay.”

(Because they’re on the same sky, right Sasuke-kun?)

kudankita street | chiyoda | july | 1946

The weather was unforgivably cold, as the wispy clouds of mist puffed out.

She stood before an unfamiliar hall, surrounded with white-washed corners and gleaming varnished plates, the pillars held by the thick off-white ropes. It was a languid Sunday morning, the vintage lanterns shining softly over navy carpets and the small gathering of mourners congregated at the shrine under the forked roof finials, the parallel logs protruding at the edges of the wooden shingles.

Rising from her seat, she fluidly stepped outside the cool shade of the white curtains. Aching feet—swollen, throbbing and painful like her entity—walked towards the names engraved in marble, where the new names listed the dead with pride, embossed



proudly under the glowing lights.

There was only the scent of ash-incense as she gazed at the slowly rebuilding city.

Haruno Sakura had been told—courteously by her companion for this trip, a helpful resident named Shizune—that the old war temple held the names of the soldiers who died, defeated in disgrace and captured during the four year strife.

She did not give a damn if the dark stares condemned her presence, a foreign entity that defiled the sacred graves of these soldiers. Blunt nails skimmed over names, wishing that she could find those characters that he once taught her.

Then, she had read the list of familiar characters, cold embossed lines of
うちは.

Sakura did not know if that engraved name just carved her heart out.

Sitting by the temple stairs, she did not care if the wind forewarned of a coming storm. No one already paid attention to that insane woman who sat on the rough steps, staring at the horizon, as if searching for something.

“...Am I going to be okay?” she whispered to no one, the first fall of tears on her cheeks—no, they were not hers, not hers, even if she tasted salt, she knew they came from the raining heavens.

She could no longer see the sky.

All she could see was him, bent over her, looking at her stained face.

Sakura slowly stood up, looking at Sasuke with a terrified gaze, like she had seen a ghost.

Sakura remembered that she was the one who was supposed to break the silences, to load it with impertinent blabber and never shut up. But it was different tonight, where he was more damaged, mirroring her disbelieving look.

A sudden realization came to her, numbing and piercing at the same time.

He also thought that everything was a dream.

Do you remember me? She wanted to say. *Do you?*

And she felt his fingers—of rough pads and gentle touches—brush across the side of her chin. They skimmed over the cut locks that brimmed over her brow, the curve of her ear. Grey quivering eyes, so weary of the world, took in the sight of her. He seemed afraid, as if any moment, the illusion of mint-green irises and a pink-haired woman would disappear.

“Sakura,” he spoke, rolling the name on his tongue like grasping the bittersweet taste of an old memory. “Your name is Sakura.”



Then, her nervous, skittering blabber, gentle and hoarse, was drowned on tears and laughter. She could be grieving. She could be blissful.

But all she knew was that her finely formed fingers grasped the sides of his face with whispers of *i thought, oh god, i thought i would find your name inscribed on a damn forsaken stone.*

Calloused hands grasped the sides of his nape, brushing across his waist, and then her arms wrapped around his torso and she leaned her damp temple on his now unkempt hair from behind. She found the scent of crisp thunder and smoke as her nose buried on his scalp, an ache tripling at each second she counted, as she sobbed, becoming a ball of emotions. The soft rain drops that drenched them were lit by lanterns, forming a mirage of small meteorites that streaked the starless backdrop adorned with flashing, swirling clouds.

Her lips on his temple. Her fingers on his hair. Her silent tears on his neck.

These three things made her realize that he was—

god, god, you're here.

And Sakura heard the comforting echo of her thoughts from his lips on hers.

“You *are* real.”

Amore

Sasuke Uchiha seems to be trapped in his own inner conflict.

He is a young man of twenty-one years of age. He comes from the upper-class of society; his father is an heir to an estate of boundless wealth, and his mother is of royal ancestry. He will never be in need of money possibly for the rest of his life.

He is good looking: high, prominent cheekbones; a long, thin nose; thin-lipped mouth; deep, dark brown eyes, so dark that people frequently mistake them as black.

Along with these physical assets is his intelligence—a first class degree in Maths and Economics, a straight-A student throughout his whole academic history. His personality, too, is just as agreeable: mild-mannered, quiet, maybe too quiet for some people's liking, but he has confidence.

With his good looks and polite behaviour, he can attract almost any girl he covets. He can get any job he wishes for with his near-perfect CV in hand and his courteous, smart mannerisms.

Sasuke Uchiha seems to be the perfect man. He has everything any man longs for.





But he thinks there is still something missing.



He feels empty.

No. It's not in his stomach, not in his mind, or in any other organ either. He feels as though someone has reached in within him and has taken the one thing that means the most: his heart.

Whenever he looks at the mirror, he doesn't feel any sense of satisfaction with his appearance, or his perfect grades, or with the money and countless heirlooms his parents had left him.

He feels *hollow*, as though his only purpose is to look good in every aspect of his life and being.

And he doesn't know what to do about this sensation. It simply lingers.

There was a poster on one of the shop windows that caught my eye as I left the flat. It was a poster of Seven Samurai, a film made in the 50s that was set in the Sengoku Period of Japan. I'd never seen this film before, nor did I know the plot. All I knew was that it was said to be one of the greatest films ever made.

But that's not the reason why it made me stop and think for a moment.

For others, samurai was just another word out of the many thousands. For me, it was a word filled with nostalgia.

Several images flashed in my mind at that very moment: the little boy I once was many years ago, dressed in a samurai garb and clutching the wooden sword tightly, clumsily swinging at my father who dodged the sword with ease.

My mother was chuckling at the scene, encouraging me to get my father. It was a memory I had made a point of avoiding, but now I couldn't do so any longer.

I turned around swiftly, to the direction of the block I lived in. Naruto could wait. I wanted to look at that armour again.

During the first six years of my life, my parents and I had a comfortable, idyllic life. I don't remember a lot before the age of six, only a few vague images of scattered scenarios. This feeling, this problem, began then.

We lived in a large house in one of the quieter, wealthier streets of Brighton at the time, our house abounding with numerous rooms, furnished with various paintings and sculptures that had been heirlooms from my grandparents or bought at prices that would raise eyebrows.

My father, Fugaku Uchiha, was a stern man. Even though he had inherited a lot of his wealth from his father, he was a hard-worker. This he had always taught me: to work hard for my living and to not just live a complacent, luxurious life all off of his and my mother's money. And I obeyed him obediently, more out of respect rather than fear. I



never really felt fear in his presence; I felt awed at him, occasionally overwhelmed with joy when he praised my efforts.

My mother, Mikoto Uchiha, was his opposite in various aspects. She smiled an awful lot more than my father; she spoiled me, whereas my father would try not to; she was openly affectionate, showering me with hugs, whilst my father would almost never even lay a finger on me, only patting me on the head occasionally if he was feeling charitable.

Sometimes, however, when my father was in a very good mood, he would let me dress in the samurai armour that was in the spare wardrobe. My father was Japanese, and he had told me that the armour was an heirloom that had been passed down to the many generations of his family.

The armour and the helmet that came with it were clearly too big for me, but my mother begged me to wear it. The sight of me dressed in a samurai armour that hung off my body and a helmet that obscured my vision amused my mother greatly, so I always ended up agreeing. I liked hearing the sound of her laughter, and I also liked wearing the armour.

My father would then teach me the basic moves of kendo, but I never really managed to master them. The armour, helmet, and the sound of her laughing always managed to hinder the learning process, but we still enjoyed it nonetheless.

Despite their differences, my mother and father were happy together. Although my father never seemed to show it as much as my mother did, I could tell that he was. And I was, too.

It was sometime during April, when I was six, that it started to go downhill. A week or so after my sixth birthday in July the previous year, my mother had become pregnant. I was an only child, so the thought of having a sibling to play with excited me, waiting restlessly during those nine months that followed.

On the 3rd of April, my mother went into labour. My father drove her to the closest hospital, while I remained at home with our housekeeper, literally numb with joy.

It had turned out that I was going to have a little brother.

A brother to play with. A brother to teach things to. A brother to care for.

So I sat by the entrance of the house, waiting in anticipation. I remember imagining them arriving home, my mother tired yet still smiling as brightly as she always did; my father tentatively holding my little brother, rocking him in his arms with a small smile playing at his mouth.

No one entered the house for hours. The sun, which had been shining in the blue sky when I began waiting had set. The sky darkening with a blend of blues and purples. I continued waiting for hours on end, refusing to eat, refusing to go to my bed.



When I awoke later, I was in my bed. Realising that I had been waiting for my parents since yesterday, I ran out of my room, down the staircase, and into our living room.

I had expected my mother to be sitting there with the baby in her lap: dark eyes gazing intently at my little brother with tenderness as he grabbed her fingers clumsily. I had expected my father to be sitting next to her: an arm wrapped lightly around her fragile-looking shoulder, while staring at my little brother with the same emotions twinkling in his eyes.

The sight that greeted me was not what I had thought.

My father was seated close to the window, his hair and clothes in complete disarray, gazing outside absentmindedly. He didn't seem to notice me call him, or tug on his shoulder. When he finally did acknowledge my presence, he told me to go back to sleep. Confused, I had told him it was morning, but he did not reply further.

As I later found out, there had been complications during the pregnancy. I never knew what these complications were, only that they had left my mother and the small child within her, my baby brother, dead.

I didn't cry. Maybe because what I felt was sorrow, anger, but most of all, confusion. I never fully understood the situation at the time. I couldn't comprehend, let alone acknowledge, the fact that my mother and baby brother were gone and I would never see them for the rest of my life.

I tried asking my father once about this, after the funeral.

He simply didn't reply. It wasn't because he didn't want to, but due to the fact that he couldn't hear me. Everyone that talked to him, offered their condolences, talked of her will, but he couldn't really hear. He, too, was at a loss as to how to comprehend this fact.

Throughout the weeks that followed, my father did not speak a single word to anyone unless it was of greatest importance. I remember that although he was looking at his surroundings, they were not really seeing; they were completely lost.

He stopped working as well, paying no attention to those annoyed at his behaviour. He simply wandered around the house, as though he was a ghost haunting the place rather than its owner.

When he wasn't at home, he was in his car, driving to nowhere and anywhere. Sometimes, he would be home after half an hour, other times, he wouldn't be back for days.

One day though, the 21st of June, I saw him getting ready to leave the house. I didn't say anything to him, but I knew he sensed my presence.

He turned around to face me and looked at me, looked directly and properly at me for the first time in so long.



His dark eyes were strangely clear as they moved across my face, slowly and carefully perusing my features. And then, after a minute of silence, he said to me: "You've grown, Sasuke."

I was too shocked to reply, and he didn't seem to care about my response anyway.

That was the last time I saw him.

While driving at some unknown junction, another man rammed his car directly into my father's, completely obliterating my father and his car. He died from the injuries the crash left him.

Even that time, upon discovering of the news, I still didn't cry. I never really found out the real reason why I didn't. I guess it was because I lost so much that I stopped caring.

I recalled thinking, as the coffin was lowered to the ground, that even though he was killed on that day of June, the day that he truly died was on the 3rd of April. He was a dead man from then on, a body with no soul, no feeling.

Nothing.

Only memories remained from the man that I once knew as my father.

Back then, when he died, I finally understood the severity of the situation. I finally realised that my mother was dead, my father was dead, and my unborn brother was dead. I wasn't as confounded as I had been before. I didn't feel like the confused child I had been those months before.

There was then the question of who was going to take custody of me, and what would become of the house and the will.

In the end, I found out that the housekeeper, Catherine Hyde, was my mother's cousin on her mother's side of the family since her father was Japanese. She was the only relative I had at that time.

Catherine was a stern woman of forty-five years of age, who had treated me fairly with compassion, but also with a certain amount of assertiveness prior to the deaths of my family. She ended up taking me in.

It was entailed in their joint will that I was to inherit most of their estate, along with the priceless paintings, statues and other heirlooms. Catherine had also been listed as a beneficiary and she was to inherit about a quarter of their joint estate.



It was about a week after the death of my father that I moved out from the house. It was a vexatious process, especially since I didn't know what to do with all the heirlooms. Catherine had suggested selling the heirlooms that weren't needed, but I refused to.

So in the end, they were kept in the house and another housekeeper was hired to take care of the house in our absence.

That warm day in July was the last time I saw my house for many years.

Catherine's house was small, but quaint. She lived with her husband, Adam, who was 3 years her senior. He was a quiet, calm man who always seemed to be relaxed, whereas Catherine always seemed to be agitated. They had only one child, a daughter, but she was in her mid-20s and had moved to London.

Life in their house was quiet, relaxed, serene; reminiscent of my life with my mother and father. They weren't as happy as how my parents had been, but there was a shared feeling of contentment between the two.

They treated me with kindness, especially Catherine. During the first week I began residing there, her personality had softened towards me completely. But it didn't attenuate the sense of loss at all. Actually, it was rather annoying, having to listen to her voice that seemed to be dripping with sympathy and pity.

I didn't respond to her newly acquired compassion and simply ignored her. Soon enough, she stopped treating me with that uncharacteristic way and went back to her usual state of agitation and severity.

Throughout the years that followed, my life was fairly uneventful. I had gone through all these years mostly in silence, just thinking. As Catherine and Adam conversed, or watched one of those cliché soaps on TV, I would sit in silence. Just thinking.

I would think of the family I once had.

Sometimes, I would imagine what it would've been like to have a little brother. I would imagine advising him on various petty details of life, playing the games I'd seen other children played at school, teasing him when he got a girlfriend. All those scenarios would play in my mind and that sharp feeling of sorrow would continuously stab at my carefully made walls of self-restraint.

When I grew older, I would go out for walks to clear my head. They were refreshing, but the only downside was that people would stare at me incessantly, whispering quietly to one another. Most of them would say the same things: I was the poor boy who lost his parents. My mother died in childbirth. My father died in a car crash. I had no more family left. It was always something along those lines.



It was annoying, to hear them talking non-stop about me, so soon enough, I stopped going for walks.

I stopped leaving the house, except for going to school. And school was just as annoying. For a while, whenever I would enter the classroom, the sound of everyone talking would fade away. No one would ever greet me, and I wouldn't greet them. All their eyes were on me as I walked across the room to my seat.

Only one boy in class bothered talking to me. Naruto Uzumaki, a complete idiot and the class clown. How very peculiar it was though, that he was the only one I ever felt like talking to, even if it was only to call him an idiot.

Naruto was very irritating. His mouth could never quite fully close, even if the teachers had always told him to shut up. He was always talking and rambling on and on about some unimportant anecdote he found funny. And he always seemed to make a fool out of himself; most of the time, it was unintentional. He never seemed to care about it at all.

For some unknown reason, it was in Uzumaki Naruto, that annoying thirteen year old, that I made my first and only friend.

As soon as I graduated, I got a job at the local supermarket, and worked there in the weekends. I went to college during weekdays, taking Maths, Economics, Biology and Chemistry. And when I wasn't at college or at work, I would stay at Catherine's house and study.

Wake up. Shower. Eat. College. Work. Dinner. Study. Sleep. That was my routine. I made no time for anyone else, even for Naruto. I almost never saw him then, since we went to different colleges. The only form of contact I had with him was his long, sometimes unintelligible texts or emails. Nevertheless, they never failed to amuse me.

Those two years of my life continued in that unrelenting routine, almost remaining completely undisturbed, save for Naruto's occasional messages and other small matters. My life at that point felt like a song on a seemingly permanent loop.

Those two years left me with As in all my A level courses, and a couple of thousand pounds. I resigned from my job, to the dismay of my manager, but I had to continue with my plans.

A week after my 18th birthday, I told Catherine and Adam that they didn't need to take care of me anymore. I told them that I was going to sell my old house and that I would be moving to London.

I had been looking at the flats there weeks before my birthday and had found one I liked. I had already paid for it, so I wasn't going to stay in their house any longer.



They asked a few more times if I was sure about it, probably for self-reassurance, and I told them that I was. I then assured the two of them that as soon as I got my full-time job, I would send them money in return for their gracious and hospitable treatment of me, to which the both of them insisted that I shouldn't.

Adam simply shook my hand, a calm smile on his face, whereas Catherine took hold of me, taking me by surprise. Her grip was tight; her smell sweet and inviting, vaguely reminiscent of my own mother.

I remember feeling something for her, at that very moment. Maybe some sort of affection that a child would have towards his mother.

But just as quickly as she had grabbed me, her arms released me, and that sensation left with her.

A week later, I had already sold the house and the majority of the invaluable heirlooms at an auction. The only ones I didn't sell were the samurai armour, two wooden swords that had the insignia of my father's ancestors on the hilt, and a few golden bangles my mother wore.

(I can still hear the ringing of the bangles resonating in my ears now; everytime I pick up that same jingling noise, thoughts of my mother haunt me.)

I got a lot of money from selling them, but I never dared to use it, only leaving the acquired cash in the bank. Even then, I never had the urge to forget my father's advice, as though it was some unspoken rule.

The only time I ever resorted to use his money was in buying the flat and some necessary appliances. I immediately found a part-time job at the local supermarket to pay off my debt to him and worked there in the weekends.

About a week or two after I moved into London, I began applying for several different universities. I managed to get into my first choice, and went on to study Maths and Economics.

I made no friends at university either. During my first year there, I would sometimes sit in the field at lunchtime, eating or reading a book. Other times, I would simply take the train home. From there, I would go into one of the cafés close to my flat.

It would be those times when my mind would drift to that idiot Naruto. He had continued to keep in touch, although it was mostly him who was making the effort of sending an email or text.

He had told me he was working in a café, and that there was a girl working with him who he was really attracted to. He then asked me how he should "pick her up". I felt like laughing, but settled for a smile, and didn't bother responding to his message.



That feeling of emptiness had always been there.

And it continued to haunt me all this time, residing within and gradually eating me away. But I always managed to hide it, mostly by overexerting myself in both my job and at the university. Naruto's messages also helped, even if they were mostly pointless and stupid.

I continued to push myself to drive that sensation away.

But it never left me. I suppose it never would. No matter what I do, it would still be there.

Those taxing three years finally ended and brought me to where I currently am. I graduated from a university, and I resigned from my job at the supermarket. I had rewritten my CV and planned on finding a full-time job.

As I surveyed my flat, taking in the sight of the unfurnished walls and floors, I felt as hollow as it was. I had never bothered to decorate the place with the few heirlooms I kept. I hid all the heirlooms away, in a wardrobe that I hadn't opened for years. I suppose it's symbolic, really, of how I'd kept my past away in a corner of my mind.

But now, for the first time in so many years, after seeing that movie poster, I decided to look at them, especially the samurai armour.

It is 12:30 when Uchiha Sasuke arrives at the café ten minutes away from the block he lives in. He visits it now and then ever since he graduated from the university, mostly to get away from the silence and emptiness of his flat. Today, he thinks, is a special occasion of sorts. He hides a wry smile at the thought as he orders a croissant and a cup of earl grey tea.

Today, his friend, Uzumaki Naruto, is moving to London. In his message, he had also said that his close friend was coming to live with him as well. Sasuke had replied, saying that they were to meet at this café by thirty minutes after midnight.

It takes only a few more minutes of anticipation and occasional sips of the warm tea before he finally sees the matured face of his old friend, talking to another person as he enters.

As Naruto enters the café, his eyes quickly dart across the large, well-furnished room, taking in the many unfamiliar faces before finally landing on his friend. His mouth stretches into a broad grin as he turns back to his close friend and former crush, Sakura Haruno.



“Look, Sakura, there he is!” he exclaims brightly, gesturing to the table where his friend is sitting with a finger. She holds back a sigh at his lack of subtlety and glances at the pointed direction, her eyes landing on his friend.

“Is that him?” she asks, incredulous, before adding in an uncertain tone, “He doesn’t seem like the type of person you’d be friends with.”

“What do you mean?” is Naruto’s innocent reply.

“Well, look at him. He’s all prim and proper; neat and tidy. And you, well, you’re the complete opposite of him, to put it frankly.”

“You know what they say, opposites attract! Anyway, you’ll see how deep our friendship is.”

The blond, indelicate twenty-one year old begins walking with an unnaturally quick pace towards the table.

“If you say so,” Sakura says, even though she knows he isn’t listening, before following Naruto. She snorts when she sees his feet slip on the carpeted floor because of his quick pace.

“Sasuke!” Naruto exclaims brightly, as his friend looks up at him in annoyance.

“Idiot,” the aforementioned man replies bluntly, before looking away and drinking from his mug.

“Hey, that’s not how you treat a friend after all these years. Do you know how long it’s been? Five years! Can you believe it?”

“Yes.”

“That was supposed to be a rhetorical question!”

“I wonder where you learned such a big word.”

“At college!” is Naruto’s proud reply.

Sakura, meanwhile, watches the conversation in mild surprise and interest for a few moments, before deciding to sit down to ease her fatigue.

“Yes, I did go to college, it’s no joke. Don’t look so surprised, bastard!”

Sasuke has stopped bothering to listen to Naruto and is simply drinking his tea amusedly. By this time, Naruto realises he has neglected Sakura’s introduction far too long.

“Oh yeah, bastard, this is Sakura. She was in my class for sociology in college. Sakura, prove to him I went to college! Anyway, Sakura, this is Sasuke, A.K.A. the bastard.” After finishing with the introduction, Naruto leans back and waits for them to greet each other.



“Hi, I would say I’m Sakura but you already know that. And yes, Naruto did go to college,” she tells him with an amused smile on her face.

Sasuke, for the first time, acknowledges her presence and looks at her.

She is a peculiar girl. She has a small, heart-shaped face with high cheekbones. There is still a bit of puppy fat in her cheeks, which adds to her childlike, elfin look. She has a pair of bright, clear green eyes, framed with pale-coloured eyelashes. But the most peculiar thing of all, she has long, soft-pink hair that goes down to her waist. Briefly, he wonders if it is natural, or whether she wants to be ‘different’ and has dyed it.

As though she can read his thoughts, she adds, “And just to let you know, my hair is naturally this colour.”

“I didn’t ask,” he replies coolly.

“You were thinking of it.”

“And how would you know that?”

“It’s what everyone thinks when they first see me.”

He only grunts in response, and takes a bite out of his croissant, only sipping from his tea after chewing. In retaliation to his rudeness, Sakura simply rolls her eyes and stares at Naruto expectantly to start off the conversation.

Naruto, now noticing the tension between the two of them, decides to intervene.

“Hey, Sasuke, do you remember Hinata Hyuuga? She was that really shy girl in our class, you know? She’s the one who had a weak body and would faint a lot.”

“What of her?” he replies, finally setting his cup of tea on the table and wiping the flakes of his croissant with a tissue.

“Well, you’ll never guess what happened. A couple of weeks before when I was trying to find a place in London, I took the train. And guess who I saw on the train?”

Sasuke doesn’t bother replying, already aware of the answer, and Naruto doesn’t bother waiting for it either, continuing with his story.

“It was Hinata! I saw her sitting alone, reading a book and I decided to sit next to her. She was so shocked to see me, and turned bright red. You know bastard, she was very pretty.” He smiles softly, imagining her blushing face. “I never knew she was so pretty.”

“Maybe that’s because you’ve never really looked at her properly?” Sakura adds exasperatedly, before deciding to order a cup of coffee.

“Well, if I did, it would look weird if I stare at Hinata very closely. She’d probably faint—she always fainted whenever a guy got too close to her. I’ve never understood it, but oh well.” Sasuke hides a smile at this; the only times she ever fainted was when Naruto got too close to her. Naruto is clearly too dense to notice this.



“So, anyway, I started talking to her, asking her how she was. She said she was in her third year of medical school and that she was on her way to visit a friend. I was talking to her for a while, and when it came to my stop, we exchanged phone numbers.” Naruto pauses for a moment, deep in thought. “Hey Sasuke, did Hinata have a lisp or...or a speech impediment in high school?”

Sasuke’s mouth stretches into an amused smirk.

“Why do you ask?” comes his sarcastic, vaguely amused reply.

“Because she kept on stuttering when we were talking.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, it was really strange, because I’ve never heard her talk like that.”

You’ve never heard her talk at all you idiot, Sasuke thinks, but he chooses not to voice his thoughts aloud. He wants to avoid an argument today.

Meanwhile, Sakura has sat back down in her seat and has set down her mug of coffee on the table. A spiral of steam rises from the clear white mug her fingers clutch onto, and she breathes in the sharp smell. The warmth that comes with the steam relaxes and soothes her, completely eradicating her anger at Sasuke, as she watches their conversation in contented silence.

Fifteen minutes later, at about a quarter to one, Naruto’s phone vibrates. The vibrations spread to his right leg from his pocket, causing him to drop his extra large toffee muffin on the floor.

“Damn!” he mutters as he picks up the muffin. A strangled noise comes from Sakura, who—upon realising that she can’t hold a straight face—decides to hide her laughter in a fit of coughing. Sasuke, in turn, smiles wryly at Naruto’s misfortune, but it disappears just as quickly as it had appeared.

After throwing the muffin in the bin, Naruto slides his hand into his pocket and yanks out his mobile. *One new message*, the screen reads. He opens the message and scans through the words quickly, a broad grin breaking out onto his face as he finishes reading. Sliding his phone back into his pocket, Naruto gets up quickly from his seat and picks up his bag off the floor.

“Sorry guys, have to go.”

Naruto then leaves the café quickly before they can voice their questions about his vague statement.

The two of them now sit in silence upon being left alone, both having finished their tea and coffee.

The silence continues for about one more minute until Sakura can’t stand the awkwardness any longer.



“Look, um...I’m sorry if I offended you by, uh, assuming that you were thinking about the colour of my hair. I have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions and I—”

She stops, upon realising that Sasuke is not paying attention to a single word of hers.

“And I don’t even know why I’m apologising to you when you’re not even listening to me!”

Sasuke’s eyes turns towards her direction.

“I was.”

“Oh really? Then what did I say?”

“That you have a bad habit of jumping to conclusions.” Before she can ask about what she had said before that, he continues, “And before that, you were apologizing for assuming that I was thinking about the colour of your hair.”

“You know, you’re lucky that you have such good memory,” Sakura hisses, her eyes narrowing in anger.

Sasuke raises his eyebrows at her.

“Is that so?” comes his sardonic tone.

“You’re so annoying!”

“Well, look who’s talking.”

Sakura gives up trying to counter him. It’s too vexing for her.

“Look.” She sighs, rubbing her eyes wearily. “I-I’m not trying to start an argument with you, I was only trying to apologize. But, I suppose I can make an exception and forgive your rudeness.”

Once again, Sasuke’s eyebrows rises.

“Because if you’re as special as Naruto makes you out to be, then why should I go against his judgement?” Sasuke doesn’t reply to this, and Sakura, instead of continuing, stands up, clutching onto her bag.

“Come on, let’s go for a walk. I think we need a bit of fresh air.”

Sasuke, for the first time, agrees with her and gets up as well.

“... You know, when I said that thing about Naruto’s judgement?”

Sasuke tilts his head to her direction. She seems so small next to him, he notices idly. Her arms and legs are thin. Almost too thin.



“Well, that’s because he always seems to have a good understanding of people’s personalities. Naruto has always been strangely intuitive, even if he can be a complete idiot at times.” For the second time, Sasuke finds himself agreeing with her.

“Anyway, I wasn’t just in Naruto’s sociology class in college. I got a part-time job then in a café, and he was my co-worker.”

So she was the one he had a crush on then, he thinks as his mouth stretches into a smirk. Sakura, upon noticing his smirk, asks him what he finds so amusing.

“It’s nothing,” he simply says in return and Sakura leaves it at that.

“Well, anyway, we barely talked in sociology. Mostly because he’d say the stupidest things and it would annoy me. Naruto was just trying to entertain everyone and he couldn’t be serious for a single moment, which really got on my nerves. So I distanced myself from him.

“But, in the café, I got to know him. And I suppose, I finally warmed up to him. But that’s not the main point.”

She falters in her steps and pauses for a while. Sasuke, noticing that she has halted, also pauses and turns to face her. She is in deep thought, he can tell.

He plans to tell her to hurry up, when those bright green eyes turns to face him, wide and expressive.

“Do you know what he would talk to me about most of the time? He would always tell me that there was this boy he befriended in high school, before I moved to the area. He would say how he was such a bastard, always taking the piss out of his stupidity and embarrassing him in front of the class.”

Sakura then continues, still staring at him with such intensity.

“But then, his expression would soften, and he would tell me, ‘But Sakura, out of all the students in our class, he talked only to me. He was lonely, that much I could understand because I know the feeling myself. And I guess, I must’ve helped lessen his loneliness. Perhaps, I must’ve amused him. And it made me happy.’ I would tell Naruto he’s such a strange person, but that’s who he was. Who he is. The lonely boy who helps others.”

A soft, motherly smile embosses her small mouth.

“And do you know how happy he was, whenever he received one of your messages? His smile was so bright it would literally light up the whole café and immediately cheer everyone up.

“So, if Naruto thought so well of you, then I’m sure you must’ve lived up to your reputation. That’s why, like Naruto, I won’t give up on you either.” And then she smiles at him, beaming. For a moment, she could have been mistaken for a relative of Naruto with that smile.



Later that day, in the evening, in the emptiness of his flat, there is one image that simply won't leave Sasuke's mind: that vivacious smile and her twinkling green eyes. All the words she had said continue to haunt his mind, its effect strangely powerful upon him.

Haruno Sakura, he thinks for the second time that day, definitely is a peculiar girl.

The three of them continue to meet up like this quite frequently, always in that same café by that same table. First Sasuke will arrive, and then Naruto and Sakura will, only a minute or two after Sasuke.

Sometimes, however, Sakura will arrive on her own to see Sasuke. Why, Sasuke never really knows, and although he pretends that it is annoying, deep in the back of his mind, he knows her company isn't so bad.

When it's only the two of them together in the café, they will then leave after a while and go for a walk in the same path they did on that first day. On these days, Sakura will tell him about herself and her life.

He has now learned an awful lot more about her. She's twenty years old, born on the 28th March; she had taken Biology, Chemistry, Sociology and History at college and had gotten As in all these subjects, both in AS level and A level. She's planning on going to medical school but has taken a break for a year to do some voluntary work and a bit of travelling. Next year, she plans on pursuing her plans.

Sasuke has also told her a bit about himself, about his degree and his grades and other little details, but not nearly as much detail as she has done.

It's on one of those days, though, while they're walking in the streets that Sakura finally decides to ask him about one of part of his life he doesn't want to revisit.

"Um, along with the many other things he told me, Naruto also said that you had a..." She hesitates for a few long seconds, which surprises him. During these past two weeks or so, he has learned that she always says whatever is on her mind straightaway.

She continues, after about five seconds, "...He also told me that you had quite a rough childhood."

Sasuke turns to face her.

His face is expressionless. His eyebrows are straight. His mask is perfectly in place.

Yet his eyes seem to gleam with unspoken fury, taking her by surprise.

The next words have been spoken in a cold tone, "That's none of your business."



He turns away from her and continues to walk.

Sakura feels a pang of regret at asking him as she quickens her pace to catch up to him.

“I’m sorry.” It’s a soft murmur, but it seems to echo so loudly in Sasuke’s ears.

Plenty of people had attempted asking Sasuke about his childhood, even when they themselves had heard about. He supposes it’s down to the fact that they have been so shocked that they needed confirmation, but he never told them a word about it.

“You’re right; it’s none of my business. I’m not in any place to force you to tell me something you don’t want to talk about.” Her tone is regretful. “I-I guess I just wanted to get to know you better. I mean, I barely know you as it is, we only met about a fortnight ago for god’s sake.”

Yet now, he feels such a strong urge to tell Sakura everything. His more sensible half tells him he doesn’t need to, but this urge to tell her everything, not just about his past, but *everything*, even his recent problem—the feeling is so strong.

“I was being ignorant of your feelings, so once again, I’m sorry. I’ve probably brought up so many bad memories—”

“What do you want to know?” his voice is quiet as he interrupts her. His question seems to surprise not only Sakura, but also himself.

“Everything. I want to know you better than anyone else, even Naruto.”

And so, without having any second thoughts, he tells her everything on his mind. Everything about his past, and the nostalgic memories; his life at school, college and university; the emptiness he feels. Everything.

They meet up more and more frequently, at least three times a week. Naruto rarely comes with Sakura, and neither seems to care much.

Each week that passes, Sasuke seems to learn more about Sakura. Each week that passes, Sakura seems to want to know more and more about him. And he never withholds any little detail. He never can.

The words will leave his mouth before his mind can even work out whether to tell her or not.

“Hey, Sasuke.” He turns to face her, taking in the little details of her face: The round, smooth curve of her cheekbone; the strikingly bright greenness of her eyes, a light sea green; the smooth tip of her small nose.



“Have you ever thought about how quickly time goes by?” He remains silent, waiting for her to continue. “Many people say time goes by slowly, but it doesn’t. I mean, nine years ago, in September, I was getting ready for my first day of high school. It feels like it happened only yesterday.

“I can still remember my last day of year ten so clearly. I was worried about going into year eleven, about exams, about leaving school, about college and university, just about the future in general. So many people told me that I should calm down, that college and university was a long way from me.”

Her voice turns despondent. “And here I am, five years from then, at the age of 20. Next year, I’m going to be in the university. If all goes well, in five years time too, I’ll graduate with a degree in Medicine. Then I’ll be a junior doctor, living away from my friends and family in a city I’ve never even heard of. And of course, I’ll be alone.”

The two of them have slowed in their pace, taking each step calmly and leisurely.

“That’s the one thing I hate. Loneliness. I hate the feeling so much, even if I haven’t experienced a lot of it. Even though I was an only child, my parents and friends were always there to keep me company and only now do I realise how grateful I should be for it. Now, though, I’m going to be completely on my own. And the thought of it scares me.”

The two of them are silent as they continue walking.

“You’ll get used to it.”

Sakura’s head turns to face him.

“I could never get used to it. No one could ever get used to being lonely. It’s in human nature to long for the company of another person.”

“Anyone can get used to being alone, whether they like it or not.”

“And have you?”

Her voice is calm, but questioning.

“Have you gotten used to being lonely?”

“... Yes.”

“But you have Naruto. You have me.”

Then, he does something she doesn’t expect—he smiles. It’s a small one, a wry, ironic smile.

“Maybe now, you two will keep me company. But the two of you have a different path in life than me. We can never follow the same path. In time, you and Naruto will continue with your lives and forget about me. And I will continue with mine.”



This time, Sakura smiles, pensive.

“You know, it’s funny, you saying that I will forget you.”

She casts her eyes downwards, glistening in the warm light of the sun.

“It’s even ironic.” Her eyes flick upwards now, to his face. “Because I just can’t stop thinking about you. The thought of forgetting you is laughable, honestly. Ever since that first day I met you, your face has never left my mind.

“I think that, no matter how much I try preoccupying myself with other matters, your face, your voice, every little detail about what you’ve told me—I will never forget them.”

He says nothing in response to her and she doesn’t mind so much. Her words, however, has a huge impact on him. And later that day, in the emptiness of his flat, he finds himself feeling just as she does.

They meet again, later that week. As it later turns out, Naruto has been too busy meeting up with Hinata to meet up with Sasuke. The two of them have began going out, Sakura tells him with a huge grin on her face. It’s quite cliché, really, their relationship. Both Sasuke and Sakura know that it’s only a matter of time before they will hear of it; in fact, they both have expected it to happen a lot quicker than a month.

“They took their time!” Sakura says in the café earlier that day, lips stretching into a broad grin, one that Sasuke finds increasingly familiar. The two of them get up from their seats and leave the café, walking leisurely along the streets that they have become so familiar with.

They walk in silence mostly. It isn’t awkward; on the contrary, it’s quite calming and comfortable, really, to be able to walk in silence and think without having to start a conversation.

“Hey...” His head tilts to her direction almost automatically. It is an action he has become so used to. “You remember what I said then?”

“Hn.”

“...Is that a yes or a no?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I meant it. I really can’t stop thinking about you.”

“I know.”

“Because you can’t stop thinking about me either?”

She doesn’t really mean it seriously.

“Yes.”



He just takes it seriously, anyway.

“...What did you say?”

“I said yes.”

“But to what? What were you agreeing with?”

“That I can’t stop thinking about you either.”

Her cheeks flush a soft pink.

“...Wha-What do you mean?”

“Just that.”

“That you can’t stop thinking about me?”

“Yes.” He smirks. “How many times do I need to say it so you’ll believe me?”

Her fingers, which seem to be trembling from shock, slowly knot through his. He isn’t as surprised as he should’ve been.

“A billion times!” Her eyes face the ground, cheeks burning. “And even then, I still won’t believe you.”

It’s amusing, he concludes in his mind, the sight of her blushing so heatedly.

“Stop staring at me!”

“Why?”

“Be-Because!”

“Of?”

“Just because!”

It has been a year since Naruto and Sakura moved to London. In the previous year, about two months after arriving, Sakura moved in with Sasuke, though Naruto didn’t seem to mind so much, preferring to live by himself.

It is about 6:00 am in the early morning of a relaxed Sunday.

The hazy morning light streams through the half open curtains. The light pours over the shape of their still bodies, covered under the bed sheet. Her long hair, pallid coral, is splayed across the clear white pillow. His arm, elbow bent, is wrapped across her figure, fingers clenched. Her head rests on his other arm; her fingers spread open on the planes of his torso.

Sasuke slowly opens his eyes and simply looks at this peculiar woman beside him.



As he takes in her warmth—her beauty and the peace she brings within him—he finally becomes aware that the spaces, the gaps, the cracks are gradually being filled.

And he feels, feels something stir inside his chest.

And for the first time—not even when his mother, and baby brother, and his father are dead—there is a warm tingling in his eyes.

He sees Sakura as she tenderly touches his cheek. “Sasuke?”

He closes his eyes and allows himself a small smile, placing his hand over hers in a quiet, certain assurance.

At last, he lets them fall.

Autompne

She remembers that brilliant autumn day, gold sunlight against velvet leaves, her hands warm in his. They were eight then; a little too young to live and definitely too young to die. It was five o’clock in the afternoon and he’d bring her home from school, simply because his mother thought it was chivalrous.

“Thanks for bringing me home today, Sasuke-kun,” she’d say, her puffed cheeks red, her eyes shining.

“See you tomorrow, Sakura,” he’d reply, his feet buried under maple leaves, his breath with wisps of smoke. Church bells rang in the distance indicating that it was his time to go home.

He always left her with a smile, and she’d watch the fan on his back disappear round the next corner.

“See you.”

“—and we’re living in a post-modern world,” she stated with pride, her skirt swishing against her thighs, her shoes crackling against red leaves. It was autumn again. “Maybe someday, to prove that to you, *I’ll* bring you home from school.”

He merely glanced at her. “Post-modernity doesn’t necessarily mean women have to do men’s roles.” He walked ahead of her but not too far, staying close enough for the crowd to know that they were together. “I think it’s just some philosophical excuse for women to turn lesbians.”

Sakura sighed, catching up to him in two strides. “Tsk ts, Sasuke-kun, you’re such a fan of the traditional! Why, I never even mentioned lesbianism! I merely said that





these days, women can prove themselves to men, too.” She gave him a playful wink. “The



working woman has long been accepted. But what about the working woman who leaves her husband to take care of the kids and do the laundry?”

“Hn,” he replied, and it was a sound of disagreement. Sasuke didn’t like things that strayed from the usual. That, and he hated laundry. He gave Sakura a glance; one of his eyebrows raised.

Sakura sighed; she knew what that look meant. “Oh Sasuke-kun, you don’t need to worry, I won’t do that to you!”

He gave an uncharacteristic snort almost immediately. He attempted to cover it up, though, so it came out like a shallow cough. Really, the ideas that went into this girl’s head were unthinkable. Plainly, he stated, “I don’t recall asking you to marry me.”

“Oh you don’t need to ruin it.” Sakura’s tone was irate, but she was grinning. She twirled around and skipped towards her house’s open porch.

“Thanks for bringing me home today, Sasuke-kun,” she said, like the past few days, months, years. “I wonder why you’re still doing this; we’re in middle school now. I can go home on my own.”

Sasuke shrugged. “Do you want to?”

It took less than a second for her to reply. “Of course not!” She smiled a pretty smile; it was the smile Sasuke knew she only reserved for him, for this moment, for the times he brought her home.

Sasuke adjusted his grip on his bag and nodded. He liked this. This was routine. No words about marrying him, leaving him, or doing the laundry. “See you tomorrow, Sakura.”

She smiled gratefully.

“See you.”

And he left then, knowing Sakura was still on the porch, watching his black gakuen uniform disappear to the autumn night.

He never looked back.

Years passed and they continued walking side by side, still never too close but never too far away. Sasuke was fine with the arrangement. Sakura was frustrated.

“We’re nineteen now, Sasuke-kun,” she said one day, when it was autumn again. Her short plaid bounced against her thighs. She looked at her reflection in one of the store windows they passed by; here she was: short skirt, high socks, and brown loafers, looking completely adorable, but Sasuke still treated her the same. She didn’t even know why she tried. “You’ve been walking me home for eleven years. Don’t you think you should at least agree to go out on a movie with me?”



He gave a noncommittal grunt.

She sighed. “It’s not a date,” she clarified. Then, knowingly, “You wouldn’t like a date.”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow at her, his aristocratic features ever unchanging, his chiseled jaw shut. Cars zoomed by behind him. “Who said I wouldn’t like a date,” he finally replied, his tone monotonous, not even a question. “I don’t recall saying that.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “I know you, Sasuke-kun,” and she sighed, because sometimes he was really so impossible. “If I asked you to go on a date with me you’d ignore me for the rest of my life.”

He seemed upset—

“And no, don’t make that face, you know it’s true.”

He shrugged then. “Dates are fine.”

Sakura shook her head. “No, no, *you* don’t say that, Sasuke-kun. Dates are not fine. They totally go against your personality.” She glanced up at him (he had gotten so tall) and observed how the streetlights played in his eyes. “You’re Sasuke-kun. You don’t *do* dates.”

“You made that up,” he said plainly, giving her a knowing stare. He remembered the time when she made up something about a woman leaving a man to do the laundry. “I already said dates are fine.”

“You say that now, but when someday I muster up the courage to ask you—” And it was a good enough confession, both of them knew, but it had happened several times before and neither of them cared. Well, maybe Sakura did. A little. “—you’ll reject me.”

Sasuke didn’t say anything.

Then Sakura skipped in front of him, turning around so she was facing him completely. Sasuke had to stop inches away from her to keep from colliding into her. The early night wind blew her now-waist-length hair, and it fluttered with the breeze, elegant strands of pink framing her face, gently moving in and out. The last remaining rays of the sun were reflected on her eyes. She looked sad, dejected, and content all on the same time. “Someday, Sasuke-kun...”

She began with a wistful tone, and Sasuke had half a mind to cut her off before she said something he couldn’t handle. Sakura was usually unpredictable, but today he had a bad feeling about what she was going to say.

“Sakura—” he began, but the scene before him made him stop.

The streetlamps were on, and around them, headlights flickered around. The sun was setting somewhere in the west, giving her a soft waning glow—all the lights



combined made her shimmer in the middle of the dark street, her hair were hues of pink, red mahogany, then pink again. Her cheeks flushed, her skin white smooth and creamy.

She looked beautiful.

She smiled at him, sadly, and her eyes were shining wet.

“You’ll break my heart.”

Sasuke didn’t speak then, for he couldn’t; he just stared at her for a while, wondering what to say—

Until he realized that they were already in front of her house, and she had skipped to the porch just like always. Without further ado, she smiled and said, “Thanks for bringing me home today, Sasuke-kun.”

As if nothing had happened.

Sasuke gave a blank stare, and nodded.

“See you, Sakura.”

When he walked away today, Sakura didn’t watch his back. But since he never looked back, he wouldn’t know that.

From behind her house’s door, Sakura wept.

“See you.”

“It’s nice you still do this for me even when we’re in different colleges,” she mused. Her skirt was still short, her socks still long, but her brown loafers were black heels. “Isn’t it tiring, going out of the way to fetch me?”

He shook his head. “It’s routine.” He glanced at her then, and didn’t expect to see a small frown on her face. He sighed; he didn’t mean *her*. “It’s part of my day,” he corrected.

Sakura grinned. “No need to change what you said, Sasuke-kun,” she started, proud. “I’m fully aware of how large my role is in your life.” She gave a large smile, sincere, and looked to him for approval.

Sasuke didn’t speak again, like he always did when Sakura made strange flirty comments like that. It wasn’t because he rejected her, surely not; most of the time, he just didn’t know what to say. He glanced back at her and gave a curt nod, his face not really agreeing but not really disagreeing, either.

Had it been anyone else, it would have been an awkward moment. Luckily, Sakura knew well enough.

She changed the subject.



“So anyway, Sasuke-kun,” she said, pulling her jacket tighter around herself, because it was autumn again and the wind was strong. “You have to fetch me earlier one day. I want to introduce you to one of my classmates. His name is Hyuuga Neji and you will love him!”

Sasuke gave her a disbelieving look. “I most certainly will not ‘love’ any *him*—” he began before Sakura’s strange expression cut him off.

“Oh really?” she asked, her head tilted and her eyes faced the deep orange sky. She wasn’t in her white lab coat today, Sasuke noticed, and it felt nostalgic. “I always thought after you kissed Naruto you were—”

“Sakura,” he stopped her with a stern call. His face was blank and his stare annoyed. Sakura thought he had also gone pale. “That was—”

“An accident,” she finished for him, laughing. “I know, I know. You don’t have to be so uptight about it.” She winked at him, and it was familiar, just like her plaid skirt long socks and leather shoes. “I only said you’ll ‘love’ Neji-kun because you two are so much alike!”

Neji-kun. Sasuke noticed how the name slipped out of her tongue easily. He glanced at her. Neji-kun. Somehow, he didn’t like it. It was out of routine, her calling other boys by their first name with that suffix.

“He’s all silent too,” she began, looking amused. She walked forward and he noticed she was gaining speed. Usually he was ahead, a few steps in front of her; but today it was her in front of him, almost skipping. “And he comes from a rich family. He also makes that strange ‘hn’ sound.”

Sasuke glanced at Sakura’s animated face and tried not to clench his bag too tight. “Those points hardly make us similar,” he said, colder than he had intended. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“I suppose.” He heard Sakura say. For a few moments, only their footsteps filled the empty street. “Well, he does agree with me on post-modernism. I mean, he says he won’t mind doing the laundry.”

Sasuke opened one eye and glanced at her, only to find that she was smirking. “Unlike some people I know,” she added with a giggle.

When they arrived at Sakura’s house, Sasuke had relaxed a bit. She was only teasing, he told himself. He had absolutely nothing to be worried about.

This Hyuuga Neji person wouldn’t be ruining the routine.

“Well, thanks for bringing me home today, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura said, but she didn’t move onto the porch like she usually did. She stayed next to him, breathing softly, puffing out white smokes of cold air.

“You’re not going in yet,” Sasuke said plainly. He looked at her and knew why.



“Well,” she began unsurely, “I just thought it would be nice to stand out here for a while, enjoy the sunset, look at the sky.” Her hand moved casually to her hair, stroking it. “It is a beautiful autumn, and—”

Sasuke sighed. “It looks good on you.”

Sakura smiled widely, but had the cheek to pretend to look startled. “Huh, what?”

“I’m not mad about it,” he said instead, hand reaching out to touch the end of her shoulder length locks. He pulled on a few strands casually, and said again, “It looks good on you.”

“I wasn’t worried if you were mad about it,” she answered defiantly, but a rosy blush had spread around her cheeks. She walked slowly to the porch then, and one of her hands tugged on the same place he did. “I just thought it was time for a change.”

“Hn,” was the only thing he replied to it. Then, slowly, “It’s a good change.”

She smiled radiantly. “Thank you, Sasuke-kun.”

He nodded. “See you tomorrow, Sakura.”

He walked away, carefully, and didn’t look back.

“See you.”

“I think,” Sakura started, very slowly, “that you should stop walking me home, Sasuke-kun.”

They were already by her house. She hadn’t entered the porch. It was autumn and their garden was filled with mahogany-brown leaves, crisp and dead.

Sasuke stared at her. “Hyuuga,” he spoke the name with unhidden contempt, monotonous though his voice was. It was an easy guess. She had been talking about him for days.

“Yes,” Sakura admitted, her short hair limp, her eyes afraid and dull. “Neji-kun... he asked me out yesterday, and I, well...” She bit her lip. “I said yes.”

Sasuke didn’t speak; Sakura thought he didn’t even breathe. She was scared, so very scared; her relationship with Sasuke was something she treasured deeply, and telling him this was the last thing she wanted to do. But there were boundaries friends could have—should have—and she was quite sure that walking home with him everyday was constantly blurring the line she had set.

“I’m sorry, Sasuke-kun,” she said sincerely. “I... I meant to tell you yesterday, but I was—”



“It’s alright.” And he shook his head, as if he had understood something. His sharp jaw glistened under the lamplights, and Sakura thought she saw his eyes flicker with anger.

“Well...” And for once it was awkward, so awkward, and Sakura hated it. “I...” She looked down at her black heels, long socks, and plaid skirt. Every day, she tried to keep up with his routine. Every day, she let him fetch her at school. Every day, they talked, she laughed, he almost-smiled, and then they reached her home. Every day, she said thank you and he said see you.

Every day, she watched him walk away. Every day, he never looked back.

Every day, she gave her heart. Every day, it broke.

She never kept track.

Until now.

A decade of routine. Sasuke was fine with the arrangement. Sakura was frustrated.

Sakura composed herself. She tried to smile, her thank-you-for-bringing-me-home-today smile, but all that came out was a small curve of her lip. “Thanks for bringing me home today, Sasuke-kun.”

She tried to read his eyes. He wouldn’t let her.

Sasuke only nodded and gripped his school bag tighter. “See you, Sakura.”

He walked away, like he always did, his proud back disappearing around the next corner, leaves fluttering behind him as if he were taken by the autumn wind.

Sakura didn’t even bother to go inside when she cried.

“See you.”

“Sasuke-kun!” She was beyond angry. Her skirt ruffled against her ankles and her white heels stomped on the park’s concrete tiles. “I can’t believe you!”

He ignored her apparent distress and stood in front of her, like he always did when he brought her home. The sun was setting but the lamplights weren’t on yet. The maple leaves by his feet fluttered a little, but ultimately stayed.

“You stopped calling me three years ago. You stopped visiting me way before that. And then today, you do this?” Her emerald eyes glowed brightly against the soft light, full of anger and passion. “I have half a mind to leave you here and—”

“The laundry,” he continued for her. Then, in his most serious tone, “I’ll do it.”

Sakura was taken aback. “What... what are you talking about?”



“You can leave me,” he said, without a single doubt or break in his voice, “You can leave me for work to take care of the children and do the laundry.” His eyes were so sincere that Sakura immediately ruled out the thought that he had gone crazy. “I’ll do it.”

“Sasuke-kun,” Sakura sighed, knowing where this was going. She smiled sadly. “That can’t happen.” She sat down on one of the available benches, smiling wistfully. “You never asked me to marry you.”

Sasuke almost-smiled then, except it wasn’t an almost-smile. His eyes laughed as he knelt down beside her, putting both her hands in his. He pulled out the ring on her finger and threw it to the maple leaves, leaving it to be wisped away with the autumn breeze.

Sakura looked appalled. “Sasuke-kun, what did you do that for? That was—that was my—”

Sasuke, from his kneeling position, only stared at her. With a real smile, he told her,

“We’ll get a new one.”

She will forever remember that brilliant autumn day, gold sunlight against velvet leaves, her hands warm in his. They were twenty-eight now. It was five o’clock in the afternoon and just moments ago he whisked her from somewhere far away. His mother thought it was chivalrous. The rest of the world thought it was insane.

“Thanks for walking me home today, Sasuke-kun,” she said, smiling. Somewhere far away, church bells rang, stopped, then rang again.

Sasuke stared at the sky, thinking of years before and years later. He glanced at her; she was the same, yet not so the same; her white dress was ruffled, and her hair was tousled, and one of her heels had broken from running. But she was always with her light pink hair, and puffed red cheeks, and shining eyes.

Sasuke smiled. Routine. Everyday. Forever.

“See you tomorrow, Sakura.”

Sakura kissed him on the cheek, and waved.

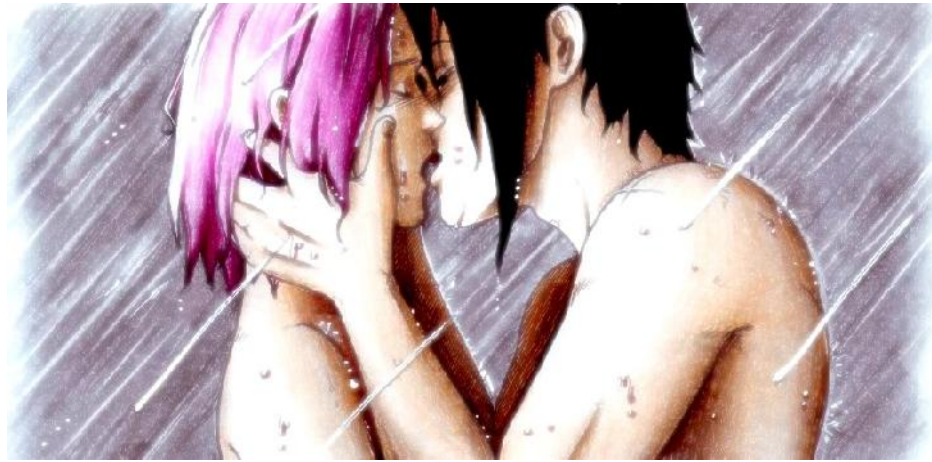
“See you.”

That day, Sasuke didn’t walk away.

(And there was no need for him to look back.)

Colors and Cliches





I. Pink hair and rainbow dreams

He is eight years old when he first meets her, and even at eight, it is not a day he is likely to forget.

It is some kind of event, one his parents calls an art convention—an event that includes fancy food he does not really like the taste of, colorful drinks that he is not allowed, and beautiful paintings of places and people that seem all too real, but really aren't. Of course, there are real people as well—most dressed in tuxedos and gowns, talking in mixed words and languages that he cannot really understand, in soft tones he can only be fascinated by. Classy, as his older brother terms it, and he supposes it all is.

Except her.

She is standing in front of a painting, her teeth biting her lower lip and her brows slightly furrowing in concentration. Reluctantly, he stands beside her—not because he wants to, but because his mother is taking him there to admire the same canvas of color hanging on the wall. His mother smiles and whispers, silently approving what she is seeing.

He stares at the little girl beside him, and wonders if her pink, cotton-candy hair is a painting, too. She is a scrawny being, really—all thin arms and legs, and a slightly puckered face that seems to not know what sunshine is, hence the paleness. It matches the paleness of her dress, and he wonders if she really is real, or a surreal vision that the slightest wind will blow away.

Then, she stares at him, as if feeling the gaze. Her eyes are green and bright, he notices—they are the only things about her that seem to give off life.

She speaks.



“The painting’s pretty,” she says.

He doesn’t look at the painting, but he nods his head. Slightly.

“You’re pretty,” she offers, a smile blooming on her lips. It looks awkward and crooked, but very pleased.

“You’re pink,” he offers back. Her smile blooms wider.

“I’m Sakura,” she chirps.

“I’m Sasuke,” he intones, in his quieter version.

She practically beams at this, before turning towards the painting once again. Her eyes go dreamy—it is a look he sometimes sees in his mother when she rearranges her new curtains, or when she is just sitting in her swinging chair in their backyard, humming a quiet melody to herself.

The girl named Sakura sighs contentedly.

“You know what my wish is?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer, but he nods again. Slightly.

“That painting. I want to live there someday.”

Slowly, Sasuke turns his head to look, and he doesn’t understand. The canvas is a bright splash of mixed colors that swirl and swirl until he cannot even tell one from the other.

“It’s an abstract,” he states bluntly, inwardly proud of himself for knowing such a word.

She merely tilts her head, and gives him a beam.

“No. It’s a rainbow.”

He wants to protest that no, it isn’t. They’re just colors. But he is being dragged again by his mother, this time away from the painting. And her. He looks back though, and finds her waving at him. He does not wave back. But he keeps on looking at the girl, an instinct in him to protect her, to not let that scrawny figure come to harm. He is eight years old, but he already knows this—his brother, after all, is doing the same thing for him.

Sasuke smiles a little.

Pink.

ii. *Red blood and bitter memories*

He is twelve years old when he sees her again, and everything is different.



They are in middle school, and it is his first day in class—four years away from town, and he has come back, with only his suitcases, inheritance, and the wealth of knowledge that his father has inculcated in him even at such a young age. Nothing more. There is a blond boy that sits next to him and talks so loud that the sound is likely to damage anyone's ears—not to him though, because he isn't even listening. He is merely brooding, letting the tidal wave of what has happened one month ago wash over him, take him away from this stupid, stupid place.

"Hey, are you even listening to me? I said my name is Uzumaki Naruto, and I'm the greatest student in this school! You better pay attention because you're talking to one genius here!"

The chairs scrape, and shoes scramble—but nobody is really listening to the exclamation except the last person who comes in, and who stands near the chair in front of them all, palms flat on the center table and a smile crinkling his half-covered face.

"Since you say that, Mr. Uzumaki, can you give me the answer to the homework I gave yesterday?"

There is silence, then a buzz, as the silver-haired man writes the problem on the board and the self-proclaimed genius tries to stutter out his answers—though none of them is correct.

"Mr. Uzumaki, you can stop now."

"But Mr. Hatake, I'm really good at this! I'm just warming up! I'm—"

"Ah, it seems like we have a new student in the middle of the school year—isn't that grand? Sit down, Naruto. And you don't have to tell me again that your homework got eaten by an attic monster. Or by your non-existent dog. Uchiha Sasuke, if I'm not mistaken?"

Some girls near him giggle, and give him either dreamy-eyed or shy little looks. He ignores all of them, and pretends the peculiar, grinning (though that can't be for certain, because most of the cloth is covering the lower half of the man's face) math teacher he will have to deal with for the rest of the school year is not talking to him at all.

The blond boy, however, is never one for silence.

"Mr. Hatake, he's probably just a snob—I bet he can't even answer our homework! I'm smart and look at how confusing it all seems to me—"

"104."

Shocked silence.

"I beg your pardon?" Kakashi Hatake asks, raising an eyebrow.

"104," Sasuke repeats quietly, without any interest at all. "You just have to add and divide, and factor it all out. Basic." The class holds their breath as they wait for him



to explain it further. But he does not, and just stares coolly down on his desk, wishing he is anywhere but here.

“But that’s cheating! You—”

“It’s 104. Dead lasts probably doesn’t know that.”

More silence—then, loud chuckles amidst a protesting blond. The teacher then writes the three mentioned digits on the board, and emphasizes it with a very loud grate of chalk to underline it.

“Well, well. Looks like we have a resident genius in our hands here. That is correct. Sit down, Naruto—seriously.”

“Bastard,” Naruto finally mutters under his breath, scowling and glaring with all his might. “I will beat you next time!”

The class once again ignores this, and turns to the board while their teacher finally commences with the day’s lessons. Some, though, look back to the raven-haired boy and wonder why despite his correct answer and seemingly superior attitude, there is a dark aura surrounding him, making him almost untouchable. He is a bit aware of this, but not really—instead, he disregards them all, and shuts his mind off the lessons that he is already good at, because his mother has taught them to him already just a year ago.

Because it is a memory that he does not wish to remember, he shuts it off too, and waits as the bell rings, and takes him to the crowded hall of Konoha Middle School. It is a big school, he knows—just as he knows that it is expensive, with kids his age dressed in the most preppy uniforms in the world (an exaggeration, but not far from the truth at times), and decked with the finest gadgets ever invented. They are young, but they are hip, as his brother would have termed, if said person is still alive.

As the wave of pain comes (he nearly staggers in the hall with it, though it never, ever shows on his face), it is interrupted by the sound in front of him—a loud cry, followed by an equally loud thud. Then, there is snickering, and a flash of pink darts down, and books and sheets of paper suddenly start flying everywhere.

“Go back to your trailer, you freak. What are you even doing here?”

The redhead in his class stands above her, sneering. Sasuke sees this and remains silent. The girl on the floor is equally silent, picking up her books and papers one by one and straightening her glasses as she stands up, knees wobbling and mouth trembling as if trying to prevent the tears. She looks up, and by accident their gazes meet—hers surprised, his emotionless. He notices that they are the greenest eyes he has ever seen, and that she is the scrawniest person he has ever met. Ugly, if he has to be honest—it is only accentuated by the ragged uniform she is wearing. She opens her mouth, as if wanting to say something. To call something out.

He turns around and never looks back, even when he hears her books fall on the floor again, and the snickerings repeat, and a growl comes out of her mouth (he knows it comes out of her mouth, that voice, even if he can’t explain why) as a high-pitched



scream comes, demanding for a certain pink freak to let go of the redhead's *long, luscious locks* (as the redhead repeatedly shrieks it).

The pink triggers his memory—but because it is accompanied by the vision of his mother with a smile on her face, and the comparable vision of dark red that surrounds the same woman with eyes cold and blank, and a fatal wound on her chest (*blood, lots of blood dripping from it, flowing like a deadly river on the cold, cold surface*), the memory vanishes, and lets him live in his seclusion once more.

He is twelve years old, and he sees her again. He doesn't recognize her at all.

iii. *Purple flowers and lonely graves.*

He is thirteen years old when he bumps into her, and it is exactly a year after his family's death.

He doesn't expect anybody to intrude his visit to the graveyard—all he wants, after all, is privacy, as he brings his mother's favorite flowers, his father's favorite musical piece, and his brother's favorite motorcycle picture. He would have rather just burned them, but he knows that if he does, he will not stop thinking and thinking about it until he breaks.

And that's not something he is never, ever allowed to do.

As he nears the tombstone where he is to lay the things he has brought along with him, the sight nearly catches him off-guard.

No, there is no pink-haired girl standing on his family's tombstone, or sitting on it, or anywhere near it.

But there is one on the neat, flat marble box right beside it. Her eyes are closed, and there are tears drying on them. Her hands are in a fist with purple flowers clutched (wildflowers, lots and lots of them) inside. She is breathing slowly, almost evenly, as if she has been sleeping for hours already.

The box has only one name. *Maki Kisha*.

He steps forward, not sure whether to be concerned or annoyed. Before he can decide, his foot snaps a twig. As if on cue, her eyelids flutter, then slowly open. It takes a long time for the sleepiness to vanish, for the blur to disappear. The pain to settle in and hide.

When they do, the first thing she does is sit up, and look at him. She looks surprised again, but only for a moment. Then, she stares at the tombstone beside the box she is sitting on, and a sad smile lifts the corners of her mouth.

"I should have known it was your family."



Silence.

“How did they die?”

He does not know why, but his annoyance only surges. She is a nobody—just a girl in his school who is constantly being bullied, and who is too weak to stop it from happening.

“It’s none of your business,” he says bluntly, glaring at her.

She ignores him, and stands up—he notices her knees are badly scraped, and a bit red. Wincing (because they are probably still tender), she ignores the knees and divides the flowers in her hands. She places half on the box she had been sitting on (*sleeping* on), then crosses the grass to place the remaining blooms on the stones with his family name. They are wilted, and not at all impressive—but she does not seem to notice this at all. Or maybe she does not care.

“I always visit her, even if she’s not my real mother...I was adopted, you see. It doesn’t matter. We miss them, and that’s what’s important.”

She tilts her head towards him, and gives the bright roses and memorabilia in his hands another sad smile.

“You’re not cold after all.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Not really. But you’re still pretty.”

The memory jolts once more. She is nodding her head now, and putting a respectful distance between them, walking away, away—

Cotton-candy hair, and a paleness that is surreal, like it is part of something bigger, a swirl of colors—

“Who are you?”

Silence.

She looks back, and their eyes meet again. This time, she gives him a bright smile and it makes her eyes sparkle again, almost as if the earlier emotion in them has never been there.

“I’m the same girl who wishes to live in the rainbow.”

She vanishes and leaves him be, because she now knows he recognizes her—not the girl in school, but the girl in the classy, ethereal art convention from long ago.

The next day, she never shows up in school again. Nor in the graveyard. He does not allow himself to wonder why, and to be honest, nobody really notices. Only the most annoying person in school (even more annoying than *that* girl) does, because it is all Naruto ever talks about—it seems that the blond loudmouth is quite smitten with her, because he deems her intelligent and kind. Sasuke does not care about all this, of course.



But he lets himself take note to add another rose to his bouquet—he can just *maybe* put it on that small marble box, if ever her wildflowers will not show up there.

The wildflowers, like the girl, stop showing up for a long time.

iv. *Yellow notebooks and tentative smiles.*

He is fifteen years old when she comes back to town, and this time everything is different again.

He is not as bitter as he had been in the past. Time has gotten to heal all that and has made him a better person to deal with.

At least, that's what he likes to think so (seriously, though—it is really just what Naruto, his once-most-bitter-rival-turned-best-friend, keeps telling him to *try* to be, so maybe it is already getting through. A bit). It is in their next meeting, inside the chemistry laboratory of Konoha Science High School, that she proves otherwise.

She is different, too. Still as undernourished as always—but she does not look all-bones now, and her color has developed a nice, healthy feel to it. Sort of. She is smiling to everyone, and most that went to school with them in the past do not even seem to remember her, except maybe for the pineapple-headed Nara Shikamaru, who had always been aware that she is just as smart as he—and his girlfriend, the blonde, vain Yamanaka Ino (who used to have a crush on Sasuke himself, but that was *way* back then, as she likes to say every chance she gets—along with trying to canoodle with Shikamaru every chance she gets as well, of course), who had never been one of the girls who had been mean to her.

Sakura sits right next to him, opening her neat, yellow notebook at once and focusing her eyes on the teacher in front of them, who is spouting off chemical combinations that he already knows, and does not really want to repeat knowing again.

He is surprised—not because she sits next to him, but because she is suddenly there, as if the two years of absence had never happened. He knows it is none of his business, just as his family's death is none of hers (just as *her* family's death is none of his), and he shouldn't ask, he shouldn't even be *slightly* curious—

“Where have you been?” he blurts out—still as bluntly as always.

She stops scribbling in her little notebook and turns to stare at him with an innocent look on her face. “Huh?”

“Nobody brought any flowers there. You should have been there.”

Her face softens up, and slowly, a smile forms.

“So you remember me now? It's okay—I know someone's been doing it for me. That was very kind of you, Sasuke-kun.”



There is a *kun* to his name now, and it feels weird. He does *not* like it.

“You are very annoying,” he states, glaring at her as he does so. Her smile only brightens, and once again, as it always does, it brings out the sparkle in her eyes.

“And you’re still so stoic and cold. Nothing has changed, eh?”

Silence.

“I’ve been with my new adoptive family, you know,” she says softly, looking back at her notes. “They’re accountants, the Harunos, and they’re really nice. They took me to another city to start a new life, so I could forget about all the bullying done to me here. It was a good place.”

Silence.

“There wasn’t a day I didn’t think about mama’s grave. Or wished that I was the one bringing the flowers there.”

Sasuke inclines his head, a signal that he understands.

Then, there is a pause, and he wonders if he should ask, or just let it all be and mind his own business (for *real* this time); because he does not care, he really *doesn’t*, and it is not like she’s going to answer anyway—

“How did she die?”

A pause.

“Accident. Car accident. A drunk, careless teenager, who couldn’t handle the liquor and the road.”

Another pause.

“His name is Uchiha Itachi.”

He is shocked into silence by this, and his hands clench on top of his lap in anger, to keep it at bay and to stop himself from hitting her because she is lying, she is *lying*, his brother is not like that, his brother is the *best* brother in the world—

Except he knows that is not always true.

So maybe that’s why her little square marble is in that graveyard—the graveyard that belongs to rich people, people like his parents; and it always does make him wonder (though he will never, ever admit it) how a grubby girl like her can afford to bury her loved one there.

Or go to an expensive middle school, for that matter.

She stops scribbling and tilts her head in his direction.

“How did your parents die, Sasuke-kun?”

A pause.



It's none of your business, leave me alone, it's none of your business, it's none of your—

“Car accident. My brother was driving.”

He is fifteen years old, and it is the first time he gets to say it out loud to anyone. She seems sad by this, but she doesn't say anything—she only inclines her head, an indication that she is sorry and that she does not blame anyone.

And to his surprise, it eases a bit of his own pain away.

v. *Orange grins and meant-to-be's*

He is sixteen years old when they become lab partners for the whole semester, and Naruto deems him the luckiest man on earth.

He ignores this, of course—just as he ignores the blond's constant yakking, and constant babbling, and constant begging (because seriously, the begging is the most embarrassing of them all) for Sasuke to be their so-called bridge until they fall crazy in love and marry off into the sunset.

“Please, Sasuke-bastard, just one date! Tell her I'm taking her out to the best restaurant in town and wooing her into a night of oblivion!”

The best restaurant being the blond's favorite ramen place, of course—and oblivion, most likely, because a night with Uzumaki Naruto is best spent that way, unless you want to become deaf from all the talking.

He does not tell all this to Sakura, of course. Only the basic parts—mostly because he knows if he doesn't, his annoying best friend will just pester him until he ends up killing said best friend in exasperation.

He does not expect her answer.

“No.”

“Hn?”

She smiles at his bored response and focuses her attention on the colorful liquids in front of them. The manual is open, and so are a lot of her notes and lectures.

“I said no, Sasuke-kun. It's dangerous.”

“...To date Naruto?”

“No. I'm absolutely fine with that. But you being the bridge...no.”

He does not want to ask why, of course. But she is Sakura, and somehow he always ends up asking, anyway.



“Why not?”

She smiles again—only it is more mischievous this time, almost teasing.

“You might end up falling in love with me—and we don’t exactly want that happening.”

A pause. Then...

“Hn. Ridiculous. Why would I fall in love with you?”

“Bridges always end up doing that, you know.”

“Where did you get that?”

“Movies, of course.”

“They’re nonsense.”

“They’re magical. Like dreams, you know.”

And probably like her dream painting, though she does not mention that now—she has already been mentioning it a million times a day, and he likes to think she is finally letting such whimsical nonsense (the biggest of them all) get out of her head. For now. For such a smart know-it-all, she is always too fanciful about too many things.

“Dreams are for stupid people. So are unrealistic movies. Tch. It’s all cliché. You should be smart enough to know that.”

“It *will* happen. So it’s best to avoid the situation altogether.”

Silence.

“I’m not going to fall in love with you, Sakura. That’s nonsense.”

“Good. Don’t. I like being your friend, Sasuke-kun—and you’ve got enough fangirls as it is, and *they* are even more annoying. Friendship is enough, and it’s safe. I’ve always liked being safe.”

“...You’re annoying.”

“And you’re just speechless, as always when you say that line to me. It’s *so* used up, you know. And come on, Sasuke-kun, no more talk about things like love—we have more important things to do.”

How she manages to turn it around, he doesn’t know (and yes, yes, it does annoy him, though he is used to it by now). But how she manages to read medical books and Harry Potter at the same time, he doesn’t know either—and he thinks it best not to give himself the headache of trying. Like Naruto, she is hard to understand. But she is her friend, and so is he.

Maybe the two annoying people in his life have a future after all.



vi. *Peach gowns and first dances*

He is seventeen years old when she wears a dress for the first time, and the biggest smile he has ever seen on her face.

“Isn’t it awesome? He’s taking me to the sweetest spot in town! There will be lights and a beautiful garden and great food and—ohmygodtherewillbedancing! There’s a dance floor there *and I don’t know how to dance!*”

The smile immediately vanishes and horror replaces it. In mere seconds, she is frantically running towards him, her hair practically stuffing itself in his mouth, as she reaches out and half-brutally yanks his arms around her waist and whirls them around and around until they are both near-dizzy with it.

With an annoyed sigh, he stops them both into stillness, and glares.

“Idiot. That’s not dancing. You’re gonna make a fool of yourself.”

She glares back and opens her mouth to protest, but before she can, he is already leading her to a slow rhythm, willing her to follow the silent music in his head.

“And *never* lead. That’s just not the right thing to do. Let him lead. He’s a wimp if he doesn’t.”

They dance in her living room; her glare is gone, and she is back to her cheerful self.

“Well, I don’t think he’s a wimp at all, but this is a big help altogether because I’ve honestly never danced in my entire life. At least now I won’t look like a total klutz when we do get a chance to have that dance, and it will all be so romantic just like in those adorable movies, and—oh. By the way, *what* are you doing here, Sasuke-kun? In my house, I mean?”

“Not my choice.”

“Huh?”

“Your ex asked me to check up on you before the date. He’s fretting like a little girl—which he is.”

“Hey! You are so mean to Naruto. Leave him alone! And by the way? He is *not* my ex. All we ever had were friendly dates, and his infatuation is now directed to someone else. Where is he now, anyway? Aren’t fretting people supposed to be the ones around here, instead of you? You hardly look like you care.”

“Where do you *think* he is?”

A pause.



“Oh, right,” Sakura intones, grinning now. “Hinata. Out on a date again, eh? Go, Naruto! Isn’t it awesome? They’re such a cute couple and I bet they’d have cute babies together and—ouch! Sasuke-kun, did you just pinch my elbow?”

A grunt.

“Just shut your mouth and concentrate on dancing. Seriously.”

She rolls her eyes, but obeys him and lets him lead her. She even hums along to the silent music still in his head, imagining it is as boring as he is, and not at all the romantic and hip kind she has been envisioning all along. The slow rhythm relaxes her, and she closes her eyes and almost leans her head on his shoulder—then she snaps back, as if realizing what she is about to do, and stumbles on her own foot in the process. She clutches at him to keep from falling, and *still* ends up with her head on his shoulder.

“...What was that all about, Sakura?”

“Um...I remembered you hated too much human contact so I backed away? Which I’m still doing now, it turns out. The human contact, I mean. Which you hate, because you’re an antisocial freak.”

A pause.

“...And you’re weird.”

“Whatever, Sasuke.”

“If this was the real date, you’re doomed.”

Her head comes up, and it takes him a moment to realize that her eyes are just inches away from him, and looking all puppy-eyed and nervous.

“Really?” she asks softly, almost hopelessly. Because it is a bit pathetic, he only holds her closer and continues the dance. She does not protest, and they go on like this for maybe seconds... minutes, maybe. He notices she is warm, and is breathing evenly now, and is so comfortable with him that she tightens her hold and so does he, until he can practically feel the soft material of her dress through his shirt, tingles and *warning bells* suddenly running all over his head. In huge, huge circles.

“Sasuke-kun?”

Her voice is breathless, and wonderful.

“...Hn.”

“This is nice. You’re really good.”

“...Hn.”

She tightens her hold even more, and it makes him realize that he is doing it too. In fact...he is doing it first, and she is only following his lead.



And she feels so soft around him—almost like rose petals, with the scent of subtle flowers in spring.

The first thought in his mind is: *Shit*. The second is: *Cliché, Cliché, Cliché*. And the third aren't even words—they are just thoughts of her mouth, and how it is now breathing warmly on the crook of his neck, and his fingers are itching, and his own mouth is wanting to—

The doorbell rings, and the circles in his head stop. She quietly disentangles, and he sees that her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are glowing, and the smile is back, more real than ever. This is for her date, of course—she is getting too excited for her own good.

“I have to go. Thanks, Sasuke-kun.”

Her dress is peach, and it flows on her body in a quiet, graceful way.

“Your dress clashes with your hair.”

“Only gay people say that, you know.”

“Tch. Whatever.”

“I bet you are. Bye!”

As she flees out, it shocks him how he actually wants to follow, so he can pull her back in, trap her body between his and the door, and prove to her that no, he isn't—in the most daring, sensual way possible.

But it shocks him more that tonight, this very night, is the first time he realizes that she is, in fact, not ugly. She is weird, and moody, and *so* annoying and...lovely. It is a deadly combination, and a dangerous thing.

And so is the desire that is suddenly running low in his stomach.

vi. *Blue shirts and comfort words*

He is eighteen years old when she cries again, but this time, it is not because of her dead mother. And it is not because of him.

It is midnight, and he is almost not surprised to see Sakura standing outside his doorstep, shivering in the wind and hugging herself to ease away some of the cold. She is always there, as a habit (a habit that Naruto has taught her), whether it is to just ask him a question, study together, find someone to talk to (though she always does the talking), or find something to eat.

But it is the first time she comes there with tears streaking down her eyes, and misery written all over her face.



“I’m sorry, I know it’s late, and I know you don’t like me barging in—it’s just...it’s over. Gaara and I are over.”

He knows they’ve been together for a long time, Gaara and her. It is an intense relationship, one that he tries to tell himself he is not affected by, because seriously—he *isn’t*. It’s just that he is her friend, as is Naruto, and if there is one thing the two of them ever agreed on in their entire life of disagreements and conflicts, it is to protect her, no matter what. In the last few years, everyone is happy with this arrangement.

(He is lying to himself, of course, but it works out best for him that way.)

But now, he can see that the happiness is somewhat gone. Her voice is soft and sad.

He does the only thing he can think of.

“Come in,” he says gruffly.

She stops talking, her face crumbling at his bluntness and the familiarity of it. She doesn’t even think anymore—it is instinct, it is comfort, as she steps forward and falls into his arms, her tiny arms going around him as she trembles very quietly.

He doesn’t ask why. Instead, he picks her up and grumbles a bit as he does (she *is* heavy, now that she is eating more and living a good life), taking her up the stairs as slowly as he can until they reach the guestroom that Naruto always crashes into when he is drunk—hence the orange shirts that are lying around, which Sasuke never bothers to pick up (because the idiot blond is there most of the time anyway, and he *always* makes a mess).

He places her on the bed and loosens his hold, intent on getting her a cold drink and a soft blanket to warm her up—but she doesn’t let him. Instead, she tightens her hold around him, her hands fisting on his favorite blue shirt.

“Sasuke-kun,” she whispers, burying her face in his neck—it is just like in the dance, that one dance they had, where she is seeking his help to ready herself for another. Before, it was a simple date—now, it is heartbreak. “I’m not good enough. I knew it. He knew it, too. He cheated on me.”

She is now crying silently, and it stirs something inside him. Then, she is trembling even more, and she is tightening her hold even more, and he knows that in this moment, it is he that she needs. Not Gaara. Not even Naruto. He, Sasuke, is the only one who understands her pain, because even if it is not the pain of death, as it was before, it is still the kind one feels when left behind, with no one to pick up the pieces.

There is only silence, as he lets her soak his shirt, lets her break out the storm. It takes a long time, but eventually, the storm does stop, as do her shudders.

When it does, he finally speaks.

“You’re a moron.”



She freezes in his arms—then, after a few shocked seconds, tries to pull away. She looks up at him, hurt and defiance shining in her green eyes.

He only looks back, his own gaze steady and irritated.

“You’re a moron for believing he’s good enough for you,” he finishes, firmly.

The irritation in his eyes disappear when he sees his words finally register and her eyes soften, and her mouth slowly forms a small, tender—reluctant—smile.

“You’re such a softie.”

“Hn,” he grumbles in protest.

“You—are,” she says, yawning as she does so. For a moment, she only continues staring at him until her eyes flutter close, and her figure finally slumps, sleep finally overtaking her.

He lets her sleep in his arms and tells himself it is because he does not like to be bothered in moving her anymore.

The next day, Gaara is sent to the school clinic with a broken nose, and a wounded pride that he isn’t likely to forget for a long, long time.

vii. *White dresses and innocent fantasies*

He is nineteen years old when he takes her virginity and the innocence that has always been in her soul for years now.

It is a long time coming—he knows this, knows it has been building up from that first shared moment, that first realization of how dangerous her presence can be. He is denying it, of course—just like he is denying everything he is feeling towards her, because he doesn’t understand it; and what Sasuke doesn’t understand, he *doesn’t* think about. But her eyes, it seems, are always making him think of dark depths and danger.

And that is what they are now, when he finds her in one of Naruto’s guestrooms, on Naruto’s birthday bash, her eyes dazed and a bit blurred, but determined as she tries to fend off the man currently trying to tackle her to the floor and have his way with her.

In a split of a second, the man is on the floor, alright—all by himself. And with Sasuke’s foot connecting firmly on his neck, choking him near to death. He lets out a pathetic yelp, but Sasuke ignores that. He only tightens the choke, until he is all but flailing like a helpless little fish out of the water. From the corner of his senses, he hears someone yelling at him to stop—but that might just be his imagination.

The fury rolling coldly in his blood, he takes the man—stupid boy, really—by the scruff of his neck, and places his mouth near the boy’s ear.

“If you do that again, I will kill you.”



Before he can react or sputter some kind of apology (because the fear in the boy's eyes is enough to appease this now-dangerous man than any apology), Sasuke shoves him out of the door. Violently.

He then shifts his gaze, and that fury turns to Sakura.

She stares at him in surprise, and almost backs away at the venom in his dark eyes. She then clenches her fists and moves forward.

"It was—I don't know who he was. He just came in while I was taking a break and—"

"You were drinking."

She stops and seems to be trying to register his words.

"I'm...not drunk."

And because she says this with her mouth all but swollen, her white dress all but asking him to peel it off, and her eyes all but trapping him into their depths, he doesn't even stop to think anymore as he silently locks the door behind them.

"Good," he says darkly.

Her stare first widens in confusion, then realization—then, in what can only be awareness. He knows she is opening her mouth, and trying to speak. But no words come out anyway, as he continues to stalk forward, backing her efficiently into the nearest available surface, trapping her body with his. The heat flares, and there is no denying it now—her soft gasp is proof enough. His hands come up, and touch her skin to feel the tingles—he knows she can feel it, judging by the quick intake of her sharp breath.

"I—Sasuke-kun...what are you doing?"

It is inevitable now.

"I'm going to screw you, Sakura." His voice is low, and promising. Primal. The words are crude, purposely so, and he whispers them on her neck before moving his lips down to trail hot, feathery breaths. He waits for her to push him away, to run away from him and get him back to reality and to the fact that *he should not be doing this*. She is Sakura, and she is innocent. And he...

He has been damaged for a long time now.

But she doesn't push him away—instead, she only looks at him, with those wide eyes, her irises darkening into something he can finally understand.

The meeting of lips, his initiation, is an explosion that both of them have not anticipated.

The taste of her, however brief, is a tremor that instantly has him enraptured as everything snaps.

As the barriers of his control finally break.



Without thought he takes, takes everything that she is offering before him. He doesn't give her time to think, because he himself *can't* think, and all that is left is the taking, the lust that is increasing it all.

He wants it swift, basic—a quick release to finally quell the urge, and finally let him move on from the desire that has been sinking into his skin (*spinning and spinning out of control*) for years now.

She then whispers his name, and presses up even closer against him, her fists unclenching and one palm smoothing to touch the center of his beating heart.

It freezes for a moment, before beating faster...faster.

In the span of a single breath, what is supposed to be a quick and carnal transforms into something achingly slow, achingly erotic.

It would have made him panic, as he is already on the verge of the reaction anyway—it is just like in the movies, those romantic movies that she loves and that he hates. He knows that if he is in his right mind, he *will* panic and walk away before it is too late.

But now, he is only drowning as she pulls him in with every kiss, every touch.

It is a mind-blowing combination of heaven and hell, and it is over too quickly. He waits it out, until the heat settles into warmth, and she curls up against him, not saying anything but just being *there*, a presence that falls asleep in his arms once more.

There is not much Sasuke is afraid of, but what she is making him feel is one of them.

This is why when Sakura wakes up the next day, she is alone, heartbroken.

And the bed is cold once more.

viii. *Indigo nails and damning desires*

He is twenty years old when he realizes she is seeping into his skin.

He first discovers this the moment she stops talking to him in school—there are no words, no smiles, not even an acknowledgment whenever their paths cross. Naruto notices this, and persists to know why—when Sasuke refuses to tell him, he then comes to the conclusion that it is Sasuke's fault, and so Sasuke needs to *go ahead and apologize and put Sakura-chan out of her misery, you bastard!*

But she isn't miserable. She is still smiling, still as cheerful as ever, seeking out the company of other people now. There is Yamanaka Ino, the popular blonde, who becomes her project partner in Economics for some weeks—the two are instantly tight as glue after that. Then, there is Inuzuka Kiba, who nowadays waits for her at her locker



before first period. They chat, and there is a certain mischievous glint in his eyes that Sasuke doesn't like. At all.

It is when he finds them more than talking in the lockers one day that he feels something in his blood simmer into something dangerous, something deadly. Furiously, he strides closer, and before Kiba can flirt any further, or Sakura can respond at all, she finds herself being dragged off, with a gaping Kiba staring at them in shock and a glaring Sasuke warning him not to follow.

He does not, of course. Only Naruto is ever brave enough to cross Sasuke (Sakura is, too) when he gets into these moods.

The next moment, a protesting Sakura is taken into an empty classroom and the door is locked. It is so much like the scene in their past but before he can even step closer, she is already shoving him away, her eyes glittering with fury and rebellion and utter defiance.

"You don't get to do it a second time," she tells him indignantly, before he gets to speak. She is breathing hard, clenching her fists, and standing as if ready to face down any battle—he tells himself he should not even *think* about how her being angry like this is so hot, and how her being so close is making him feel the things that he wants to forget about altogether. "Don't you dare think you can do this to me one more time! Kiba—"

It is the name that has his mood snapping, has him backing her up the wall until she is trapped again, and they are too close for comfort.

"Don't say his name," is all he says. She does not listen.

"You have no right to tell me—"

"Don't say his name," he repeats—only this time, his voice comes out in a low whisper, and he is already leaning closer so that his mouth touches her skin, and he feels its softness and heat. Without thinking, he is already tracing it with his mouth, and his fingers are already moving away from the wall and pulling softly at her hair.

"Say my name, not his," he commands, his mouth starting to move. She smells just like before, and tastes just like before, and he is caught up in it once more.

"I won't—"

"Say my name."

"No."

"Say—" He moves on to kiss her throat, "my—" down to her collarbone, and he feels the tremble, feels it increase, "name."

"Sasu—don't. I...don't."

Her voice is trembling, too, but it is not enough.



“My name,” he says quietly, lips tracing her own and feeling them quiver. “My name, Sakura.”

“W-Why are you doing this?”

Because he has no answer for that, he does the only thing he can think of, even when his brain is screaming at him to stop. He takes her mouth in his and kisses her hungrily, molding their bodies together as he does so. There is an explosion and a loud roaring in his head, and it is all he can hear as her breath hitches, as her body softens against him. She is responding, and he is drowning in every minute of it, and he does not ever want it to end.

Then, the roaring stops, and there is a slice of pain in his cheek as he staggers backward abruptly. His hand touches the cheek, and there he feels the slap, the ring of it loud and clear.

He looks at her, and she is staring at him with wide eyes, a mixture of anger and desire and hurt and so much more in them. Then, she is running away from him, without a single word.

He knows there is something he needs to tell her, but he does not want to. It is not enough, and maybe it is better if he just lets it go.

I'm sorry. And something more.

He cannot say it.

The last thing he hears is the sound of the door slamming, and the sound of his beating heart as he realizes the reality that from now on, he and Sakura are going to be friends no more.

ix. Crystal pendants and muddy goodbyes

He is twenty-one years old when he graduates from college, and officially inherits his father's hotel business.

It is a big establishment, he knows that, accompanied by big responsibilities that would have been handed straight to Itachi, if the guy had been alive. But now there is only Sasuke, and he is the designated one, whether he likes it or not. Years ago, he would have done anything to fight his way up to the top of the ladder against his brother, with all the passion he has, just to make his father finally see that he is just as good as said brother and to make his mother proud.

Now, it is just business and nothing else.

With the chain of hotels, he inherits a fiancé—the daughter of his father's corporation partner, the one who is making sure nothing has collapsed, nothing has gone to waste until Sasuke is determined as capable enough of handling it on his own. His



fiancé is named Lena, and she is elegant and beautiful, a bride-to-be that everyone believes is perfect for him—their marriage is already planned, even before the day he is born.

This is business, too.

Of course, Naruto is not among those who agree that they are perfect for each other—and Naruto being Naruto, this is immediately pointed out in the loudest way possible.

“I mean, sure, I get that she’s one hot gorgeous mama, and you’ll probably get a lot of hot, sweaty sex while you’re at it...” Instead of wriggling his eyebrows, like what Naruto usually does when talking about sex, he just ends up frowning at his own words. “...But Sasuke, you bastard...What about Sakura?”

To that, Sasuke has no comment. There really isn’t a point anyway—mostly because he and Sakura have never been anything, as far as...everyone is concerned.

It is a secret well-kept, and even Naruto only has his suspicions.

The night before he leaves town to settle with his new future in the city, he visits his family once more and finds her there, with flowers in her hands and a silent prayer on her closed eyes. She notices his presence, as she always does—and it is then that she opens her eyes, and stands up, and finally, finally faces him.

It is the first time they see each other in this place in two years now. Whether that is avoidance or something else, it is not named, because names involve explanations, expectations.

“Sasuke-kun.”

It is the first time in two years that he hears her say that too. He does not admit how much he misses it.

She speaks, not looking at him as she does so.

“Do you know what a prism is?”

It is not what he is expecting at all, which is why he has no immediate answer. But he doesn’t need one, because she continues speaking.

“It’s cold to the touch, and confusing at first—all those reflections and different colors tend to distract people a lot, and make them only see the surface.”

Silence.

“But I went to look past the surface, and you know what, Sasuke-kun?”

Silence.

“I finally understand.”



It is then that she looks at him, her eyes conveying something he cannot understand. Slowly, she approaches him and hands him the flowers. Silently, he accepts them and ignores the way his fingers tingle at the contact of her hands in his. She probably feels it, too, because there is a minute tremble in her skin before it vanishes off into nothingness.

The smile, however, is steady on her face.

“I heard. Congratulations.”

There is no accusation in her voice. There is only gentle acceptance and quiet relief.

“So you’re leaving town tomorrow, eh?” she asks.

“Hn.”

“Me, too.”

He shouldn’t ask. He knows he shouldn’t ask, he knows it’s none of his business now, he *knows*—

“Where are you going?”

The question is met with silence, before she smiles for the last time, and backs away.

“I’m off to find the painting I’m destined to live in, Sasuke-kun.”

She doesn’t say goodbye, because it has already been spoken in their silence. He doesn’t say it, because he knows the finality of such words, and somewhere deep in his mind, he knows there is no such thing as goodbyes when it comes with her. The moment she is gone, he takes a look at the flowers in his hand, takes note of the crystal hanging on the ribbon tied on its stems. It looks expensive, and fragile, and easily broken if not handled with proper care.

As the realization of what she means sets in, of how she has him tied up with the crystal (and yes, only Sakura will ever complicate simple explanations with metaphors, and talk about prisms), he takes a quiet breath, and looks at the place where she had been standing only minutes ago. He finally understands.

The minutes continue on, and rain falls, muddying the graveyard as it always does. *Cliché*.

And Sasuke keeps on standing there, eyes closed, insides hollow.

But he does not run after her.

x. Brown chocolates and meeting strangers



He is twenty-four years old when they encounter each other once more, and to him it is like meeting a stranger that you can't help but be captivated with.

She is standing in the middle of the chocolate aisle of the Konoha supermarket, and if it isn't for the brilliance of her hair, he won't have recognized her at all—her back is to him, after all, and he is not the kind of man that pays attention to details that he won't need in any way.

The moment he sees her, it is instinct that tells him to approach.

“Sakura.”

She turns around, and there is a very surprised pause. Then, a pleasant smile.

“Sasuke-kun.”

The moment she says his name, it is instinct that guides him to stay and makes him listen to her voice all the more.

She chatters. After the initial not-knowing-what-to-say, she chatters as if it is her duty, her goal. He doesn't catch much of what she is saying because he is too busy listening to her voice, and actually *missing* it, but he does understand that she is now a brilliant doctor and is somewhat contented with her life.

She eventually stops talking when he doesn't respond, because he is still too busy trying to figure out why she is too thin again, with bags under her eyes and skin a bit too pale. She understands this—just as she understands that there is more than concern in his gaze (however disguised it is), and it is dangerous and beautiful and what she wants most in the world. But he doesn't know that. All it is going to take is probably one kiss for her resolve and her composure to break.

But he doesn't know that, too. So the spell is broken even before it begins, as she backs off in the most invisible way and asks him her question in a steady voice.

“How's your wife?”

He does not answer, because there is nothing to answer. His marriage is okay—empty, but okay. Because she seems to understand this, too, she only comes closer, and places a hand to his cheek. The jolt it brings him is intense and brings so many memories that he has sealed off long ago.

Just one kiss is going to change everything, he knows.

But there is still so much in between.

There are no more words afterwards, because there is nothing else to say. They are different people now, and putting back the pieces of something that is already too broken to begin with is not only hard, but *impossible*. So with a final smile, and a final wave, they start to part ways.

But not without him asking one more thing. One important thing.



“Sakura.”

He pauses.

“Have you found your painting yet?”

Her smile turns sad, but it never wavers.

“I have. I didn’t realize it until it was too late, though. So I lost it.”

There are so many unspoken words in her answer—Sasuke is smart enough to read the in-betweens, to what isn’t being said. It is easy, and it is painful, and it is almost desperate.

But it isn’t final.

He is afraid of what he is feeling for her, but there is something else that he is afraid of, even more than that.

It is losing her.

xi. *Turquoise umbrellas and second chances*

He is twenty-five years old when he divorces his wife and makes a stand for what is in his heart.

It is a long battle, and a hard one—there is so much to divide and fight about, and it is different on both sides. For him, it is the inheritance and the legacy that his father has passed on to him, that he has vowed long ago to uphold—for her, it is the love that she has always wanted from him and never received, but still *hoped* to someday. Somehow.

She has lost this battle long ago, and she knows this. Now, she finally accepts it.

He waits for a while, before he calls the one person that he believes should know the news first. It is inevitable, anyway.

“Uzumaki.”

Naruto’s voice, as usual, comes loud and clear.

“Sasuke, you bastard! After all these months and you call *now*? Where the hell have you been? I’ve been trying to contact your stupid butt and it pisses me off that—”

“I’m single again.”

There is a pause, before his blond best friend comes across again—confused, this time.



“Oooh-kay. And you’re telling me you have no wife as of the moment...*why*? What do I have to do with this? What the hell—”

“Sakura.”

It takes only that one word for Naruto to understand and not ask anymore questions—he doesn’t even yell his usual crude remarks when Sasuke hangs up on him, dials one more number.

It answers on the third ring.

“Hello?”

“Are you in Konoha?”

There is no need to say his name, because he knows she knows it is him. There is an audible pause, and there are millions of doubts and wonders and hesitant hopes in that single second, before the answer comes.

“Yes, Sasuke-kun. I am.”

The words are unspoken again, but they understand.

“Sakura...wait for me. I need to tell you something.”

The next answer she gives him sounds sad and happy at the same time.

“Yes. I’ll wait, Sasuke-kun. Of course I’ll wait.”

He arrives in town the next day, and just as before, it is instinct that tells him where she is—as where she often is. It is raining again, and the sight of her standing there among the tombstones, her turquoise umbrella steady and her brilliant, brilliant eyes on him and more uncertain than they have ever been are enough to make him come closer and finally, finally utter the words.

“Tell me you found the painting, Sakura. Tell me it’s here now.”

It is cliché, and he hates cliché, but he doesn’t care anymore, as he takes her face in his hands and kisses her like he’s never kissed her before—with warmth, and gentleness, and love and wonder that she is letting him. That she is responding. The umbrella falls to the ground as she kisses him back—that, he supposes, is cliché as well. It doesn’t matter, not now.

“It’s here. It’s you.”

No more words are needed.

xii. *Black visions and lost dreams*

He is twenty-seven years old when he finds out she is dying.



She does not come home for two days, and she does not answer his calls. Normally, this would not have worried him, because he knows her career has a way of keeping her busy—these few years of being with her has taught him that, and he knows not to press, because this is her passion, just as handling challenging meetings is his.

And he may not admit this, but he loves her too much now that every piece of time she gives is more than enough, more than precious. They have all the time in the world to make up for *his* mistakes.

Because he is called away for a business trip in another city, two days become a week, and eventually a week becomes two. No calls at all. Even Naruto, the ever-reliable one (idiotic, sometimes, but still reliable when it comes to these things), seems to be evading him. The foreboding increases, which is why when the two weeks are about to stretch on into another one, he calls a halt to everything—meetings, work, income—and comes back to Konoha.

It is Naruto that meets him in their shared apartment, packing her clothes in a small duffel bag, his blue eyes red-rimmed and his stance tired.

Their gazes meet, and the blond is almost half-surprised to see him there. But he regains his composure and greets Sasuke with a bright—*fake, too fake*—grin.

“Yo, buddy. I didn’t expect—oofh!”

The punch is fast and unexpected.

“Sasuke, what the hell—uuuh.”

There is nothing that the blond can do as the other pins him to the wall, nearly choking him there. There is a coldness in him now that cannot be avoided—even Naruto is normal enough to fear that, to understand that.

There are only three words uttered within that whirling cold.

“Where is she?”

And though the reply is normal (because she is *always* there), even expected, Sasuke knows nothing is this time.

“Hospital.”

There is no hesitation when he arrives there—all he states is her name, and the chief nurse is already looking at him with semi-concerned eyes, and giving him the room number of what he remembers is the room that she talks about just last month, when she was reveling to him how she had helped a woman give birth to a baby boy.

It’s beautiful. He’s beautiful. I want one someday, you know.

All he does is kiss her hands, smirk, and say that maybe someday that will be possible. They’ll see.



He does not expect to encounter Gaara there, outside the room, back leaning on the wall and eyes closed. As if sensing his presence, the tanned, red-haired man opens his eyes, and their gazes lock on each other—one cold and deadly, the other aloof and contemplating. Subtly, Gaara moves to stand in front of the door—a gesture that had the other stiffening, of course.

“What are you doing here?”

Gaara remains silent at the question, and it is all Sasuke can do from punching the guy as well, and barging in the room to see what accident Sakura has gotten herself into, and to make sure that she is alright, she is safe—

“Just because we broke up doesn’t mean we’re not friends, Uchiha.”

Sasuke glares. “You cheated on her.”

For a moment, there is a shadow in the eyes of this man that Sasuke had broken the nose of once (it is something that he will never regret). But it is brief, and it is gone so quickly, and Sasuke wonders if he is just imagining it.

Gaara speaks, and they are words that he pretends not to affect him, even if they do.

“She cheated on herself too, when she pretended to love me when she really didn’t. I just did both of us a favor. And now...she’s happy.”

There is silence as they continue measuring each other. It is the redhead who shifts his gaze, finally—and in turn, the contemplative becomes sad, almost pained.

Gaara speaks, and this time, they are words that Sasuke pretends aren’t true, aren’t relevant, aren’t real. They are lies, lies, *lies*.

“She has cancer.”

But he knows they aren’t.

“She’s sick, Uchiha. She needs you,” Gaara says quietly—just as quietly as he steps aside, and lets the other pass, and leaves. The gesture is almost enough to make Sasuke half-afraid of what he will find there. But he opens the door and braces himself.

She is there, of course. Paler than ever, looking so, so peaceful with her eyes closed, and her breathing normal. Lovely. It almost leads him to believe that she is perfectly fine, that nothing is wrong with her, that Gaara is *lying* and kidding, and Naruto is fooling him and then—

And then her eyes open, and he knows there is no lie in the previous words exchanged.

Her green eyes, for the first time in all he has seen of her, are dull. Almost as if she is expecting him, expecting this moment, she smiles—it is tired, and it is weak, and it is honest. Most of all, it is so full of love that it overwhelms him, and he almost forgets to



breathe. His hands unclench, and his anger fades away—all that is left is the sadness now, and the hope that this is all a bad, bad dream.

But of course, it isn't.

"You don't need to protect me, Sakura. Not this way. Fuck the prism metaphor. Or me being fragile or any of that shit. I can handle this."

"I know. It's just that...Sasuke-kun, I didn't want you to see me like this."

Her voice comes out in a whisper, soft and vulnerable.

He scoffs. "Shut up. Just shut up. You're lovely. You're always lovely."

Her eyes soften and the light is back, as brief as it is. It enchants him, as it always does. As it always will.

"Come here, Sasuke-kun."

And because there is nothing else to do, and nothing else to say, he strides closer, until he is beside the bed and then on it. Until he is wrapping his arms around her, and she around him, and there is a terrible ache in his chest and a powerful, powerful trembling—though who is trembling, he does not know. It's probably him. But she is sobbing, and there is nothing he can do but helplessly hold her, and clumsily stroke her hair, and hope that the agony in her voice and her tears will fade away and leave them be.

Most of the time, Uchiha Sasuke is right, because that's just the way things are. But not this time.

He and Sakura don't have all the time in the world after all.

xiii. *Gray skies and colorful gardens*

He is twenty-eight years old when he fulfills her wish in his own little way.

They marry in a church in the outskirts of town, a quiet little wedding with only Naruto as their witness. She is already in a wheelchair, and he knows she is supposed to be at the hospital right now—but that doesn't matter, not now. Not *now*. There is a certain vulnerability to her that he is almost afraid, thinking that one touch is going to shatter her bones and render her even more immobile than she already is. But this is Sakura, and Sakura is always stronger than she looks. This is her request too—to get away from all of it and to be with her friends one more time.

The meaning behind her request is something that they all ignore, and for a moment, they pretend that everything is normal, and okay, and lasting.

She wears white, a symbol of purity and innocence and devotion and everything in between. She is glowing, blushing, quietly rejoicing. And he thinks she is beautiful,



every minute in that church spent with her, despite the chalky grey under her eyes covered by make-up, despite the now limp hair artfully tossed together in a simple, elegant ponytail.

When the ceremony is done, he takes her home, gets both of them dressed in casual attire (making sure to wrap her in a warm blanket), and drives them to a place that he has never taken her to before. He tells her to close her eyes, and she does so, and he guides the wheelchair to a path of stone and grass until they reach the place of their destination. All the while, their hands are entwined, content on letting it remain that way.

“Open your eyes, Sakura.”

The look on her face when she does so is something that will be imprinted in his mind forever.

There is shock, and awe, and so much overwhelming surprise that her eyes immediately flow with the wetness to express it.

“Sasuke-kun. Sasuke-kun,” she whispers thickly, joyfully.

“It’s your painting. It’s your dream.”

She smiles with so much love in her eyes, in her expression, covering the fatigue as it does so, even for the briefest of moments. The smile is that of a delighted kid, and it makes him only love her more.

“It’s beautiful.”

No. You’re beautiful.

With gentle care, he carries her from the wheelchair and takes them in the middle of the garden he has planted for her. She sits on his lap, and he sits on the grass, surrounded by flowers of rioting swirls and clashing colors.

They enjoy the view for a while, before she swivels her head back to him, and her eyes soften again as she takes his face in her hands and kisses him gently, sweetly. He responds, trying to keep the desperation away from it, trying to hold on to his sanity and this one final moment.

When they break away from the kiss, she speaks again, this time with the effort not to slur her weakening words.

“You were enough, you know,” she murmurs. “You were the wish.”

“I know,” he says. “But I wanted you to remember this.”

“I will. Always. I love you.”

“Hn.”

He is Sasuke, and he doesn’t say it in words. But she understands, anyway.



It is probably minutes, or hours, as they stay there, and touch each other's hand, murmuring sweet nothings and enjoying the painting surrounding them and the sun starting to set in the distance. It is once again romantic, and once again cliché, and everything he is going to treasure. She sings softly, amidst her increasing coughs, and though her voice is plain, the way she sings it is amazing. Things are serene, and he closes his eyes and kisses her hair, content in letting her lean there, on him.

Eventually, her voice stops at the chorus of the song, and her head and hands go limp against him. Her breathing quiets down. He knows what is happening, he already knows, but he lets the sun set, lets the shadows gather on his eyelids. He lets the echoes gather in the wind and blanket him.

His eyes remain closed as he tightens his hold around her, savoring the smell, savoring all that there is to savor.

When numbness becomes no longer an option, he lets the tears come and surround them both.

xiv. *Green eyes and renewed hopes*

He is thirty years old when the pain finally dulls.

It takes a long time, but eventually it happens. He thinks it never will, that the grief won't stop—there are times when it consumes him to the point that he cannot breathe anymore, cannot want anything other than to die and leave this world, and be with her. It is selfish, and he has always been selfish—but he knows this is not what she wants, and he just can't disappoint her.

Naruto marries Hinata a year after Sakura dies. It is, to say the least, a small happiness in their intertwining lives, even if Sasuke never really cares about that in the beginning. But the blond is persistent, and Christmas invitation after Christmas invitation (with other holiday and made-up-holiday invitations in between, and threats of ass-kicking if the other doesn't show up) is bound to make him see that there is love in that marriage, and it is the lasting kind. When Hinata gives birth to a beautiful baby boy, it is a joyous event—he even smirks, mostly because the baby is so blond, and so bright-eyed, and *so* wriggly when carried, that Sasuke *knows* the little fellow is bound to be a second-life Naruto someday.

“He is your carbon copy.”

“I know! Isn't he the most handsome man on earth? Second to me, of course!”

“I just hope he doesn't turn out as idiotic as you.”

There are a few shouts coming from the adult blond, but that is expected. After a while, the said blond finally looks at Sasuke, a contemplating look on his gaze.



“I’m glad you’re the godfather, you know.”

“You’re being cheesy.”

Naruto grins. “Yeah. Whatever. I’m just glad you’re happier now.”

“Now you’re being gay.”

“Shut the hell up, Sasu-gay-o. The sun is shining brighter now, so don’t rain on my parade.”

“...What kind of dumb sentence is that?”

Naruto beams now, proudly, “It’s a metaphor. I’ve been brainwashed by the love of our life, you know.” His blue eyes soften, as if he is remembering something.

After a while, the blond is back to smiling, and back to attending to the baby, making cooing, silly noises as he does so. Sasuke watches him, at ease to be in the background, as he ponders the words beyond the silly, silly phrasing.

It is true.

He is healing, slowly, even though he knows it can never be fully anymore. But that is enough for him, for now. He does not visit the garden anymore—that is asking for too much, for now. Maybe someday, he will. He visits the graveyard, though—everyday, every other day, twice a week...it is random, and he is content that way.

Sometimes, Uchiha Sasuke still sees her in his dreams. Sometimes, they are dark dreams. But mostly they are quiet ones now, with her familiar happy face filling them, green eyes still sparkling and her smile telling him that it is okay to let go now, that it is okay to move on.

If there is one thing (*Uchiha*) Sakura has taught him, it is hope.

There are pieces in his life that can never be picked up again, but that is okay.

There are still some pieces left to start anew.

Cry

I t had been a sunny day.

The waves flowed in smooth, calming drifts, its clear reflection capturing the image of a pink haired girl sleeping under the shadows at the corner of the deck. Overhead, the skies were filled with light, carefree clouds. Other than the occasional ripple that would skim the water’s surface, the night was tranquil, almost silent.





The little girl was deep in slumber, her chest heaving periodically as she breathed in the cool, clean air. Wisps of sleep-dishevelled hair framed her heart-shaped face, her long eyelashes creating shadows on the edges of her eyelids, rosy lips slightly parted.

In a sudden jerking movement, her scalp caught against the splinters in the wood, causing her to rouse painfully.



There was a soft clatter of footsteps, and her eyelids snapped open, her eyes wide and green.

Looking up, Sakura caught sight of deep dark eyes staring back at her.

“You’ll catch a cold.”

Lifting up a tiny hand to cover an escaping yawn, she removed it to reveal a growing smile on her face.

“Sasuke-kun.”

The day had been long, and Sakura was tired.

Determined to go before her employer changed her mind about letting her off early, Sakura rushed out of the brightly lit stall, shivering as goose bumps formed on her skin at the sudden drop in temperature. She slid the thin paper door behind her, letting a puff of cold air exit from her mouth as she turned away from the shop.

The night was darker than she thought it would be.

Staring at the moonless sky, Sakura frowned as she stepped into a puddle, the muddy water sloshing at her covered feet and soiling her old robes.

Brushing aside strands of petal coloured locks, Sakura fisted her hands in the soft pink of her kimono and lifted the heavy material up to her ankles, as wary jade eyes scouted the uneven pavement, careful not to tread on anymore pools of water.

Cheeks flushed, Sakura beamed for successfully hopping over a particularly large puddle, but her glee suddenly turned into a menacing thought as she glanced at the lower part of her garment.

‘I’ll get Naruto to wash my kimono!’

The secluded route she took led to an intersection and Sakura turned into the alley; the streetlights that aligned against the walls were dim ahead of her. Sakura felt her heartbeat drumming softly against her ribcage as she tried to calm and soothe her nerves—letting go of her kimono, she searched for other passerby.

There were none.

As she approached slowly, the lights slowly flickered out and her ears caught a slight humming of voices. Fear began to envelop her as jade eyes made out a person’s shadow against the faint lighting. Tense, she paused in her footsteps, ready to flee.

A sharp, cutting voice stopped her in her tracks.

“Who is it!”



Squinting in the darkness, it was a brief moment after Sakura had recognized a man as one of the Nobles in the city before she was clubbed from behind. Her head cracked against the hard brick wall, body pinned by a large, burly man twice her size.

“Tch.”

This person had a raspy voice, one she faintly remembered hearing over the radio.

Disoriented with the overwhelming pain, Sakura wondered what kind of illegal gathering she had chanced upon as she passed out.

“Take her away.”

Sakura woke up to the familiar sound of waves.

She groaned.

Bleary with pain, she breathed in the salty air, wondering why she was by the port, which was a good distance from the alley where she had been.

The sun was rising slowly in the horizon, bringing colour into the pitch darkness.

Cherry lips parted, a silent gasp threatening to escape.

Viridian eyes widened at the looming black ship before her, finally realizing that she was tied up on a little boat with the pirate ship as their destination.

Sakura’s captor—a man with bronze, spiky hair and stocky build—was swiftly rowing the boat, his actions showing that he wasn’t even close to slowing down; and Sakura figured she only had a few minutes of escaping what would be a nearly impossible situation.

Struggling vainly against the thick rope that encased her limbs, Sakura strained her neck upwards to get a closer view of the ship.

It was upon closer observation that Sakura felt a sharp spike of fear and anger stab her. This ship was hauntingly familiar—black, black sails on a stormy night—a ship she held in regard with hatred.

The thought of meeting *him*, of all people, sent her heart jerking madly.

Sakura let out a soft whimper as pain erupted from her side, where she was thrown harshly to the ground.

The ship looked formidable with the amount of crew on board, with more making their way up because of the commotion. The ship buzzed with voices as both men and woman scrutinized her, some scoffing at her silky pink locks.



Tiny beads of perspiration trailed down her face as she struggled, determined to escape imprisonment. *She knew this ship.*

The wait only seemed too short of a time for Sakura when the crude catcalls and jeers of the crew were cut short by the arrival of a silver haired man.

His tongue darted out, wetting his lower lip, and pointy teeth were revealed as a cheeky grin formed on his face. “Maa.” Glancing at the imprisoned girl, he said, “This looks interesting—who’s this we have here?”

The crew jeered, homing in towards her, when all of a sudden, they stopped, and the crowd parted as a tall, lean figure entered the deck.

A low voice commanded, “What’s going on?”

As he gained no response, the man shifted his gaze over to her, and Sakura found herself staring back into his dark eyes. Eyes she never thought she’d see again.

It had been just a fraction wider, but Sakura saw the slight increase of his pupil before it receded back to normal—she couldn’t help but wonder if that palpable emotion she saw was guilt.

Whatever it was, it did nothing to quell Sakura’s anger. Viridian irises turned near-black with hatred as she glared hard at the dark haired man, hissing, “You *traitor!* To think that you’d join the very people who killed Kakashi-sensei!”

A thick veil of silence lapsed as Sasuke stayed stoic at the accusation, but the other crew members grumbled in anger.

There was a shuffling of feet as Suigetsu reached out to lift her chin, violet eyes scrutinizing her features. Sakura flinched as calloused fingers skimmed across her porcelain skin, holding a snarl across her features.

The man, amused with her defiance, turned around to look back at Sasuke curiously.

“You know this pretty lady, Sa—”

It had happened in a flash. A dark blade was suddenly pressed against the back of Suigetsu’s neck, stopping him in mid-sentence. He stood motionlessly, stupefied for a moment.

Sasuke’s expression was hostile, his eyes were as if burning.

There was a deathly silence, before Sasuke quietly said, “Let go of her.”

The mischievous man pulled away promptly, whining, “That’s no fun.”

In a quick, fluid motion, Sasuke sheathed his black katana as he called Juugo.

The bronze-haired man who captured her came forward from the thinning crowd, his large build towering over the rest. His eyes were a bright auburn, a deep contrast with his tanned skin. He spoke quietly, in a very reserved manner.



“Okashira, she witnessed our deal with the Minister and he ordered her to be silenced.”

Trembling with anger, Sakura seized her chance. “So you’ve resorted to capturing civilians now, Sasuke?”

Frost in her eyes, Sakura pressed on, “Why don’t you just kill me already?”

Before her, Suigetsu panicked and looked anxious for a second. “...Hey, hey, hey, girly—”

Disregarding the rosette’s outburst entirely, Sasuke turned towards Juugo—a dark scowl settling on his face.

“Release her.”

The room was dark, with a suffocating scent of perfume permeating inside. Petite hands clenched hard into themselves, her short nails digging painfully into her skin. Chest tight, a different sort of emotion was overwhelming her, and Sakura’s eyes were suspiciously wet.

Sasuke was already lighting a lamp, the flame ghosting over his face, creating shadows across his features. Sakura sucked in a deep breath, eyes flitting to his figure, taking in the changes.

Sasuke, like always, was breathtakingly beautiful. His features were less boyish; jaw more defined and face more masculine from what she remembered. His eyes were, if anything, as dark and deep as they always were.

And they were focused on her.

Sakura looked away in disgust at herself. Her anger was failing her.

The light had revealed the presence of another woman, who had spread herself out on the large bed, head propped up by her elbows. She had vivid red hair, and dark, wine coloured eyes that eyed Sakura cautiously.

Sakura’s voice was small and cold when she finally spoke.

“So, that’s your new woman, huh?”

Not removing his deep gaze from her, a dark look crossed his features.

“Karin. Get out.”

The woman scrambled off the bed, glaring daggers at Sakura as she exited the room.

Then, there was silence.



It was a brightly lit room, a rowdy bar filled with the caucous laughter of the crew. Behind the solid wooden counter, a silver haired man was absently wiping mugs, humming a silent tune to himself. Placing the mug down, he slipped a hand into his robes, pulling out a well-worn novel.

“Oi, Kakashi! Another shot!”

The man wore a mask concealing the lower half of his face, revealing only a single eye. Kakashi continued with his reading, in deep concentration, not bothering to look up as he replied nonchalantly, “We’re out of booze.”

“You didn’t even bother to look!”

Kakashi waved a hand dismissively, starting up an angry stream of remarks, which were soon curbed when a pink haired teenager slammed a mug down the bar and changed into shouts of relief.

“Sakura-chan, you’re here!”

Kakashi flipped a page, humming his tune yet again. Sakura sighed, shaking her head at the unrepentant man. A smile graced her lips.

“Who even bothered to put Kakashi-sensei on shift, I wonder.”

A lone, dark eye looked up, searching around the green eyed girl as she grabbed a barstool.

“Why, if it isn’t Sakura.”

Not finding what he was looking for—the presence of a dark haired man that usually hovered around her, he asked curiously, “Where’s Sasuke?”

“Being unreasonable,” she huffed in annoyance, reaching out to catch an empty mug.

As the man smiled, the edges of his eye crinkled. He chuckled. “I see. He’s sulking because you’re here.”

And Sakura couldn’t help but break the frown on her face.

Soft rays of light entered the cabin through a tiny hole, gracing its presence over a slumbering woman, changing the several shades of her rose tresses into highlights of pastel pink, and illuminating her pale skin.

Incoherent mumbles filled the small room, barely audible.

“...give... them back!”

Slowly she stirred, her facial features contorting into a shocked, startled expression, just as green eyes opened—swirling with desperate emotion.

Sakura woke up in a jolt.



She blinked, astonished at having fallen asleep. Stifling a yawn and flexing her limbs, she spotted dark splotches across her pale skin. Tomorrow, she frowned, her bruises would show.

The room was bare, save for the bed, a closet, and a desk; there were no sentimental items, no traces that a person lived here.

It was practically just a room.

The table was a rich, mahogany brown, its wooden surface smooth. Placed on the table was a thin, neat stack of papers, a clean brush, and an ink bottle. Scrutinizing the neatness of the room, she suspected that its owner was Sasuke.

Sakura skimmed the room, frowning as she read the contents on the papers. They were targeting merchant ships, whose timetables had been given to them by the Minister. Angrily, she crushed them in her hand, furiously storming towards the door.

It was unlocked.

In a locked drawer within the closet, a thin stack of worn photographs were tied up with a rubber band, unseen.

In many of them were two individuals—girl with pink hair, and a dark eyed boy.

“*I hate you!*” she hissed, jabbing a finger into his chest.

Sasuke remained unresponsive, his gaze unflinching. A muscle jumped in his jaw, barely visible.

The other crew members stirred, as they watched in half-horrified, half-amazed expressions. *No one had ever done that to their Captain.* Karin scowled and an amused Suigetsu jibed her.

Rosette locks flew about messily, and Sakura found her vision upside down.

Juugo easily hauled the woman over his shoulder. Sakura thrashed about, flailing her arms wildly.

“Bring her to Kiba.”

The kitchen was well-stocked with fresh supplies. A crate of lemons were stacked in a corner, next to the bundles of stove wood that were piled neatly. Racks of clean cutlery and plates decorated the walls; a pot of broth was boiling above the stove, humming noisily.

A mouth watering fragrance filled the room, and as her stomach let out a low rumble, Sakura realized that she had been starving.



Putting down a plate of freshly made onigiri on the table, brown eyes inspected the petite rosette. The shaggy brunette bent down to the seated woman, placing a tanned arm over the edges of the wood.

“So, what’s your story with Sasuke?”

Turning sharply to the stranger, Sakura glared. It was a touchy subject.

Kiba pushed the plate gently towards Sakura, offering them to her. “I’m really curious... please?”

“We were raised in the same ship, that’s all,” Sakura said stiffly as she took one serving to quell her rebelling stomach.

Viridian eyes darkened as she continued, “During our last skirmish, Sasuke traded loyalties.” A crease settled in between her forehead. “He joined this ship—he’s a traitor.”

“Really?”

Deep in thought, Kiba frowned, rubbing his fingers against his temples. There were strange, triangular red markings beneath his eyes, Sakura noticed.

“I heard that he was against joining this crew. He made an agreement with the previous Captain. Anyway, I’m sure that there’s more to it.”

“Here.” Kiba reached for a piece of paper. “Look at this.”

Sakura’s eyes widened. On the thin sheet of paper, neatly handwritten, was a list of her favourite dishes.

It was Sasuke-kun’s shift to keep lookout.

Below them, the deck was empty. It was silent, other than the occasional roaring laughter that had drifted from the bar, travelling in the wind.

Knees bent and feet perched on her chair, Sakura hugged her knees close to herself, rocking her chair. A tiny blanket was wrapped around her snugly. Humming quietly, she stared blatantly at the dark haired boy, mesmerized.

The moonlight danced on Sasuke’s still figure, weaving between his spiky hair, and tinting the ends into a slight blue. His broad shoulders shifted, and he turned to her, face sullen.

A brow was raised, and he demanded, “What?”

Undeterred, Sakura smiled widely at him. Unabashedly, she said, “I love you, Sasuke-kun.”

Sasuke’s hard features softened. He said softly, “Aa.” I know.

It was later, when Sakura yawned widely that Sasuke frowned at her.



“Go and sleep.”

The water was lukewarm as Sakura submerged into the bath; she released a soft sigh, the warm water soothed her tensed muscles. Contented, Sakura let her thoughts drift away, concentrating on enjoying her bath.

All of a sudden, the wooden door slid open, revealing the same redhead from before. A cool drift of air entered, and Sakura shivered. Alarmed, water splashed out of the tub as she swerved over to face Karin. A bewildered expression marred her features as she sat, stunned.

Karin scowled to herself and hastily pulled out a set of folded yukata, placing it by the white towels. “Here,” Karin said curtly, “wear these.”

Sakura mumbled her thanks, and an awkward silence filled the small, enclosed space. Karin shuffled her feet, but made no indication of leaving.

Sakura asked, feeling self-conscious, “Did you need anything else?”

Karin looked at Sakura, startled. She frowned. Sasuke had never fallen for any of her temptations, always keeping a detached expression—and yet she had seen her captain show more emotion since this girl arrived than her entire voyage on the ship.

She blurted out, “Just what is your relationship with Sasuke?”

Dumbfounded for a moment, a dark emotion bubbled within Sakura. Sasuke had not denied her previous accusation. *Sasuke chose Karin over herself.*

A bitter smile made its way to her face, resignation pulling at her features. And as she exhaled heavily, a misty cloud of warm air escaped her.

“I never meant anything to him.”

The smooth material of the yukata hugged her figure snugly, stopping short mid thigh, just like Karin’s did. It was a soft, pastel blue, complimenting her pale skin. Sakura clenched and unclenched her fists, looking out through the porthole.

Sasuke caught Sakura sitting on the edge of the bed, deep in thought. Shrugging her shoulders, she looked away, uncomfortable.

“Hey, Sasuke-k—” She stopped herself mid-syllable. “—did you join them ...willingly?”

Sasuke directed his gaze to his desk, the stack of papers were crushed and thrown to the floor. He remained silent.

A loud, forced laughter rang out, and Sakura looked down at her feet.

“It doesn’t matter, anyway.”



“Sakura.” Sakura could feel the intensity of his stare on her back.

Her voice shifted between different pitches. It rose an octave higher. “Y-You must be tired, so I’ll just leave.”

“Sakura.” He sounded tired.

“You can have your room back!” she added anxiously, already getting up.

Sakura squeaked in surprise as a large, familiar hand snaked around her waist, twisting her around to face him. The other tilted up her head, and he dipped low towards her ear.

His eyes bled red, and his voice was stern.

“Don’t test me.”

Releasing her, a tired sigh escaped him. With his back facing her, he moved over to the opposite side of the bed and sat down, leaning against the wooden frame. His sword laid next to him, sheathed.

“I won’t touch you, so go to sleep.”

Sakura hesitantly followed, ducking under the covers.

As green irises stared at his broad back in the dark, Sakura fell asleep, wondering why she felt lonely.

It was two weeks later when the watchtower spotted a rowboat approaching the ship, and the blond man on it was arrested.

He had unruly, sun-kissed hair, and clear cerulean eyes. The whiskered marks on his face deepened as he grinned happily at Sakura, despite being flanked by two men.

“*Sakura-chan!*” he greeted loudly.

“Naruto!” Sakura’s face was incredulous, viridian orbs wide in surprise.

“I knew you were alive!”

His beam grew larger as the rosette girl attempted to approach him, but promptly turned into a frown when Sasuke held onto her elbow, restraining her.

“Don’t touch Sakura-chan, you bastard!”

Clearly irritated, the dark haired man halted in his actions and nonchalantly waved a hand towards the blond, issuing an order.

“Kill him—we don’t need him.”

Aghast, Sakura turned to Sasuke. “No!”

“Don’t kill him, Sasuke.”



At his silence, she pleaded, “I’ll do anything! Please don’t kill him, Sasuke-kun.”

Handsome black orbs glinted dangerously, his anger was apparent as he hissed angrily at the pink haired woman, “Why are you sacrificing yourself for him?”

“...H-He’s important to me.”

Sasuke scowled darkly, turning to his crew. “Lock that boy up.”

Sakura whispered, “Naruto...?”

The prison Naruto was locked in was dark and dingy, and Sakura reached out blindly. Carefully, she lit a lamp, the bright flame creating shadows behind the thick bars. Inside the cell, Naruto’s sullen face lighted up.

“Kiba let me in, but I’m sorry I can’t save you.” Sakura looked downcast.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get you out of here.”

A loud whistle sounded just as the door slammed open. It was Kiba’s warning signal. Light filtered in, and Sasuke stormed down the stairs. Behind his captain, the shaggy brunette peeked in, wincing apologetically at Sakura, and hastily escaped from Sasuke’s wrath.

He looked sharply at Sakura, eyes burning red.

“So this is the type of Prince Charming you’re into.”

Hurt flashed across her face, and Naruto clenched his fists, banging them against the metal bars.

“Bastard, what are you talking about!”

Sasuke knew he had hurt her, but he was feeling bitter. Feeling no satisfaction in his actions, the red in his eyes receded as he sobered. Sasuke snorted and tossed a set of keys through the bars.

“Whatever, you can go.”

After a last look at Sakura, as swiftly as he entered, Sasuke left.

The silence reigned; and Naruto faced Sakura, offering a hand.

“Let’s go.”

Sakura stiffened. Her hands stayed at the sides of her body. Concerned, blue eyes peered at her, searching for injuries.

“Sakura-chan?”



She swallowed, her throat dry and her voice heavy. “I... can’t go.”

Taken aback, Naruto pulled at his unruly blond locks, frustrated.

“Why? I came to take you back!”

“There’s someone after my life.” She looked down. “...It’s safer here.”

Cerulean eyes looked dejectedly at her. “You really won’t come back?”

Guilt gnawed at her, and Sakura bit her lip, nodding.

Pale skin and dark eyes flashed across her mind. She shook her head, reciting a mantra. *I’m staying because it’s safer here. It’s safer here. It’s safer here.*

“Weren’t you leaving?” His voice was cold.

Crimson eyes stared back at her in the dark, the red in his eyes swirling, then retreating. Sakura stared, mesmerized.

Sasuke was seated on the bed, elbows resting his knees, fingers forming a platform where he rested his chin on.

Sakura shook her head meekly, closing the door behind her.

“Annoying.”

Sakura smiled, and took a seat beside him.

He left on a full moon.

Blood seeped into the splintered wooden boards of the wrecked ship. The crew were all fatally injured or dead, and their leader, Kakashi, had fallen.

It was an overwhelming defeat.

Sakura stood behind him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“I love you so much! Please don’t go!”

“Sakura,” he started, as a slight breeze flew by, and then he was behind her.

Sakura stiffened, back straight, trembling.

“Thank you.”

Her world faded to black.

The two vessels crashed.



A loud noise broke out just as the ship rocked over heavily to the side. Another ship had approached their ship and had started to attack and they had been caught unaware because of the fog. Everything flew fast, as they heard anchors being let down the ocean, and long, wooden planks being thrown overboard to the ship. Their enemies were already racing towards them—shouting battle cries.

It was an uproar.

Sasuke scowled heavily, scouting the deck for his crew members. Juugo was in plain view, towering over many others as he charged at the large hoard of approaching pirates, taking them down in a large swipe of an axe.

He found Suigetsu, who was effortlessly swinging around the large sword he carried around—a large grin on his face, thoroughly enjoying himself.

A sharp, swift sound caught his attention. The archers were beginning their attacks. Turning over, he found one aiming towards Sakura, who was holding onto a bag of bandages and thread, ushering those injured over to her.

It was spontaneous, reflexive.

His feet were a blur as they shuffled towards her, and Sasuke grabbed her waist, pulling her away as he leaped away from the subsequent arrows that they had narrowly avoided.

Stiffening, he pulled Sakura closer, the other hand maintaining a firm hold on his dark blade.

They were surrounded.

Swinging his sword, Sasuke stood in defensively, his hold on Sakura still tight. He frowned at the mass of approaching enemies, easily deflecting the few who had attacked.

Holding out his sword, he muttered softly into Sakura's ear.

“Hold on to me.”

Sakura nodded slightly, pressing herself closer to him.

“Attack!”

The crowd that had formed around the pair charged, and Sasuke's sword danced with sheer speed.

He swept out his feet, tripping two men and disarmed them easily, before swiftly slashing out at the side. Jerking his hand backwards, he butted the back of his sword into another man's stomach, kicking him into another pirate behind him.



As Sasuke deflected another incoming attack from his right, a blade came rushing in from the left, attempting to kill Sakura. Twisting his body, Sasuke tried to dodge the attack, but it was too late.

“Sasuke!” Sakura screamed, flashing a worried gaze.

Sasuke winced as a sword pierced his side. A large gash formed, and with a quick glance, Sasuke dismissed the pain. Luckily, the blade did not hit any of his vital organs.

Easily defeating the thinning crowd, Suigetsu called out to him as he got rid of the last few, “Sasuke!”

Growling as Sakura fussed over him, he pushed the rosette to the violet eyed man, shouting out an order, “Protect her. And stay here.”

With that, Sasuke left for the battlefield.

Rain was pouring in torrents, drenching them all.

Shouts of victory filled the ship, and weapons—guns, daggers, arrows—were littered everywhere on the deck.

His wet hair stuck onto his face, his spiky hair drooping. He searched desperately through the raging rain, pressing a hand against his rapidly reddening side. Not yet, he couldn’t fall yet. Sasuke winced, before spotting a cheering Suigetsu. Sakura stood behind the silver haired man, shoving a worried gaze at Sasuke.

It was instantaneous. Relief flooded his system, and Sasuke collapsed before her. Blood seeped through his clothes, pooling onto the floor. Together with the rain that had collected on the surface, it formed a rusty, red puddle.

Sakura was by his side in an instant, her hair clinging wetly to her face. The puddle splashed, as her knees fell into it, and Sakura screamed in frustration, “You’re so stupid!”

She fisted her hands into the collar of his dark robes, pulling herself to his limp body. Unshed tears pooled in her eyes, and she let out a soft, wrecked sob.

As he passed out, the last words he heard were, “You and your stupid, manly pride—”

Dark eyes opened groggily, focusing on the wooden ceiling. Sasuke felt a damp pressure against his chest, feeling another heartbeat throbbing steadily under his arm. Looking down, he saw a head of pink.



As he reached out to rouse the sleeping girl, he felt slim fingers entwined with his own. Sakura's fingers were smooth and small. They hadn't changed at all. Instead, he brushed the back of her palm with his thumb, closing his eyes once again.

"—Sakura," a low, deep voice started.

Sakura shot up in disbelief.

"...You're heavy."

She hiccupped as mortification filled her face. "S-Sasuke-kun?"

"Aa."

Sakura sniffed, scrunching her nose. There were tear stains on her face.

"I still do, you know..." She lowered her face into his chest once again, and in a muffled voice, continued, "Love you."

A minuscule smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

"Aa."

Falling Into History

This is a little cliché, don't you think?"

"No," Sakura murmured. She looked up from her train ticket and passport to give Ino a wry smile. She placed the ticket between the pages of her passport and then put it inside her messenger bag. "It would be... if he came running after me."

Sakura's smile faltered for a moment and Ino thought she would cry.

"And we both know he won't do that."

"Right..." Ino said slowly. "He's too damn proud to do that, isn't he?"

Sakura laughed slightly, nodding her head in agreement. Her chuckles were quick to die down at the thought of *him*.

"Is leaving really necessary?" Ino asked. She tightened her grip on Sakura's duffle bag, hoping that maybe if she kept it with her, Sakura wouldn't go. "You can just move out! Take your stuff and crash with me as long as you need to! Please, Sakura—"

"I'm not leaving *for* him," Sakura interrupted, offended.

Ino frowned. "But you're still leaving because of him."





“The internship isn’t that long, you know. I’ll only be gone for a year,” she said, hoping to make the situation seem better. Sakura reached over and took her duffel bag off of Ino’s shoulder and slung it on her own. She grunted at the added weight, but pushed the strain aside. “I’ll be back, Ino, I promise.”

She put on a bright smile for Ino’s sake and winked jokingly. “With presents, of course!”

“Please, can’t you stay? Sakura, you—”

“It’s strange,” she said softly, a confused expression crept its way onto her face. “I guess... my heart was bound to change.”

The blonde pursed her lips and scowled slightly when the last call for Sakura’s train was made.

“I have to go,” Sakura declared, taking out her passport and ticket once more. She then took a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Ino with a strained look. “Take care of this for me, will you? You’ll know what to do with it.”

She stepped forward and embraced her best friend tightly, burying her face in the crook of Ino’s neck to hide the tears.

“I’m gonna miss you,” Ino told her through small sniffles. “And your giant, stupid forehead!”

Sakura stubbornly let go and stepped back. Giving Ino one last smile despite it being tainted by a tear she had failed to wipe.



“See you, Ino.”

There was a duffel bag sitting neatly by her favourite boots at the apartment door. Beside it was a worn-out backpack, that he was sure was back from her high school days, and the messenger bag she often used as her purse. All of them seemed as though they were rather full.

“What are those for?” he asked slowly.

Part of him knew the answer but he didn’t even want to think of it.

Sakura came up beside him smelling like sweet lavender. Her hair was still damp from the shower she just hopped out of, the tips of her hair soaking her red blouse. With a quiet grunt, she pulled her pink locks back and twisted them into a messy bun, tying it with the elastic she wore on her wrist. She then shoved a small, dark blue booklet that he knew was her passport into the back pocket of her jeans.

“I’m leaving,” she announced steadily. She lifted her green gaze to meet his eyes. “I got an offer in Suna at Allurement magazine for their advice column.”

Sasuke nodded slowly. “Aa.”

Sakura gave an unnoticeable shake of her head as she shifted under his cool gaze.

It seemed as though he didn’t care at all.

“Give me a reason to stay,” she murmured. “Please, Sasuke, just give me a reason not to leave you because we were happy at one point, but now...” He heard her sniffle slightly. “I don’t know what happened, but things are different... You’re so distant, Sasuke. You won’t talk to me anymore...”

A tear fell down her cheek and hit her shirt.

“Give me a reason to stay,” she repeated weakly. “I love you, so Sasuke, please, just give me something...”

But he couldn’t. They had grown so far apart since they began pursuing their own careers.

Or at least, he had begun distancing himself from her.

She was always trying to include him with everything she did but he always had to decline her offers. She was always trying to talk to him and get him to open up to her but he just wouldn’t. At one point, she was everything. She was his best friend. But something in him changed and he stopped letting her in.

It was as though he fell out of what they used to be.

He remained quiet, refusing to beg.



She inhaled sharply at his silence but nodded nonetheless, accepting his wordless answer.

"I see," she murmured. "I... I'm leaving then." She gave him a tight smile. "I guess this is goodbye, Sasuke."

He nodded.

Sakura put on her shoes and grabbed her bags. As she passed through the doorway with him merely staring after her and not doing a single thing, she looked over her shoulder with a tearful grin and a light shrug.

"I'll be alright by myself."

Sasuke stared up at the ceiling fan disdainfully. One arm was strewn across the empty half of the bed and the other was crossed over his forehead. His head was spinning as it was and the light peaking in through the curtains was not helping his situation. He lay in his boxers with the blanket barely covering his legs, letting the morning winter chill brush coolly against his pale skin. He welcomed the bite it brought with a bitter frown.

She was gone.

He grunted and sat up slightly, leaning on his elbows. He winced as his hangover worsened and reached to the nightstand where he had abandoned his nth bottle of beer from the night before to get some sleep. Sasuke brought the now flat drink up to his lips and chugged down the contents, cringing at the bitter taste.

Maybe he deserved it.

With a sudden sneer, Sasuke's eyes narrowed and he bared his teeth as he growled to no one. Furiously, he whipped the empty bottle against the bedroom wall and watched it shatter into pieces on the carpeted floor.

He was going to be the one who has to clean that now that she wasn't here to pick up after him.

Sasuke let out another sound of frustration and threw himself back against the bed once more, hoping to fall asleep.

He turned over and faced the vacant side of the bed where she used to sleep. He rolled over further until his face was buried in the pillow that used to be hers.

Instinctively, he inhaled, and fought off an angry cry at her sweet, lavender scent that still lingered on her pillow.

She was *gone*.

There was a loud knock on his door and Sasuke pretended not to hear it. After a few minutes of the mindless banging, knowing exactly who it was, Sasuke pushed



himself off the bed to answer the door since no one else was going to do it. He pushed back the pang in his heart as he picked a shirt up off the ground and put it on while walking to the entrance of his apartment.

He opened the door with a bored face and saw Naruto with a hand raised, ready to knock once more.

The blond boy immediately frowned at the worn expression on Sasuke's face.

"Jeez, what happened to *you*?" Naruto asked, walking into the apartment. "*Someone* woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning!"

He proceeded to the kitchen and Sasuke closed the door gently, not wanting any more loud noises to ruin his morning further. When he made it to the kitchen, Naruto was already opening up a second package of instant ramen for their breakfast.

Sasuke watched in silence as his best friend put both bowls of soup in the microwave and waited eagerly for them to finish. He then brought them to the living room coffee table and turned on the television to watch some Saturday morning cartoons while eating.

"You better freaking remember we have a show coming up," Naruto said as he kept his eyes glued to the screen. "Tomorrow night at the Bone Palace."

"Yeah, yeah," Sasuke muttered, stirring around the noodles he had yet to eat.

Naruto regarded Sasuke with a barely concealed frown.

"Hey..." the blond began, trying to smile optimistically. "It'll be alright, you know—"

"Here."

Naruto jumped slightly as Sasuke tossed a black notebook to him, but managed to catch it. The pages were frayed slightly and there were small scraps sticking out, as if Sasuke had ripped some sheets out rather messily. The blond opened the book and flipped through the pages, noticing they were all filled with words and music.

"I wrote some songs," Sasuke muttered.

"*Some* songs?" Naruto repeated incredulously. "Dude, this can make up another freaking album!"

Sasuke rolled his eyes and gave his bowl of untouched soup to Naruto as he stood up from the couch they were sitting on.

"I'm gonna take a shower," he announced, walking away.

He made his way to the bathroom and closed the door when he stepped inside. There was still a stick of eyeliner and a few tubes of mascara and lipstick lying on the vanity that he had yet to throw away. He scowled at the thought and swept his hand across the cool ceramic counter, shoving the makeup to the ground.



The dark-haired boy looked down at his feet where a tube of red lipstick rolled up against his toe. He glared at the offending object and kicked it away.

He furiously grabbed at the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head before pushing down his boxers, stepping into the shower and turning it on.

As the near-scalding water dripped down his skin, Sasuke let out a small groan. He opened his dark eyes, uncaring of the hot water brushing over them, and frowned slightly when they came upon the caddy that hung off of the shower head, holding Sakura's stupid, lavender-scented shampoo.

They sat side by side with a bowl of popcorn in her lap. In his opinion, there was too much butter on it, but Sakura liked it that way so he didn't say anything. Much to his curiosity, she even had a bowl of nachos on the coffee table with some salsa, and a bag of chocolate chip cookies. All he really wanted was a bit of her popcorn, so it was up to her to finish the rest.

"Are you sure you'd eat all of that?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

Sakura looked up at him with a cookie between her teeth. Her eyes narrowed as she bit into it viciously. When she finally finished chewing and swallowed it, she flashed Sasuke an angry glare.

"Are you calling me fat?"

He snorted and reached into her lap to take a few pieces of popcorn and put them in his mouth. Ignoring her rhetorical question for the sake of evading her short temper, Sasuke looked back at the movie they were watching with a dull face.

"What movie is this?" he inquired, propping his legs onto the coffee table.

"Closer," she replied as she chewed on something.

He could feel the rotation of her jaw against his chest where she laid her head. Her body was pressed against him snugly and his arm was draped over her other shoulder, bent slightly as he unconsciously ran his fingers through her rose-colored hair.

"I love this movie," Sakura commented. "It gives me that whole wrenched-heart feeling, whenever I watch it."

Sasuke stared down at her incredulously. "What are you, some kind of masochist?"

"No." Sakura extended her arm to put the bowl of popcorn on the table before twisting around to lean against him more comfortably. "It's just that, you only get that feeling when there's love." The look on her boyfriend's face told her he had no idea what she was saying. She giggled to herself quietly because really, since this was Sasuke, she wasn't too surprised. "You only feel it when like, you get to the part in Sweet Home Alabama, where Melanie is drunk and bitching to Jake, or like, in Gundam Seed



DESTINY—which by the way, was epically lame—in the episode when Cagalli has to marry that dude and she’s having flashbacks of her moments with Athrun and there’s sad music on, or in one episode when Athrun looks at the ring he gave Cagalli but still leaves all depressed and all, or like—”

“I get it,” Sasuke replied, although he really didn’t.

That wasn’t a pleasant feeling, so why would anyone enjoy feeling it?

“No you don’t,” she said, reading his mind. “Heh, It’s okay, Sasuke, you don’t have to pretend you get it, with me.” She winked at him and gave him a chaste kiss on the cheek. “I won’t tell anyone your little secret.”

He snorted again. “What secret?”

“That contrary to popular belief, you actually don’t know everything,” she teased, whispering the so-called secret into his ear.

Sasuke stiffened slightly as her lips brushed against the shell of his ear but he made no show of his nervousness. He simply cleared his throat and put a hand on her shoulder to push her head away from his own before his hormones took control.

She giggled, taking his silence as agreement and snuggled into his chest.

“This is nice,” she mumbled lazily.

Sasuke looked down and saw that her eyes were now closed and she wasn’t paying attention to the dramatic movie.

A faint smile pulled at the corners of his lips at her peaceful face and he brushed her bangs out of her eyes. She wasn’t asleep, but she looked so content and he didn’t want anything—not even something as simple as her hair—to ruin that.

He lowered his head slightly and kissed her head, inhaling the sweet smell.

“You smell good,” he murmured into her hair.

She giggled slightly, his warm breath tickling her and sending shivers down her spine. “It’s my shampoo, silly. You like it? It’s lavender.”

He nodded absently.

“Hn.”

It was around noon so Mangekyou was still empty except for the bartenders setting the place up for the evening. Ino was among the people behind the bar, but ever since Sakura left, the blonde girl had been treating him with a frosty indifference. Since his brother owned the club, Sasuke was allowed there whenever he pleased. He sat on the edge of the stage, strumming his guitar while singing the lyrics of his current song.

“Maybe she knows something I don’t. I’m so... I’m so tired of trying—”



“What are you playing?”

He looked up and saw Karin. His brother had hired the redheaded girl to manage Mangekyou when his eyes began to wear down and he decided to take some time off. It was no secret that she had a thing for Sasuke, but he made no show of reciprocating her feelings nor did he lead her on.

It had been three months since Sakura left him and still...

Karin sat down next to him on the stage, near the end of his acoustic guitar. Sakura had given it to him the previous Christmas, saying it had belonged to her grandfather when he was younger. He knew it meant a lot to her and that giving it to him wasn't easy because she could have used it instead.

“A song,” Sasuke mumbled, no longer singing but still playing the tune.

“Obviously.” The redhead rolled her eyes at Sasuke's answer and turned slightly, crossing one leg and letting the other dangle off of the stage. “What's it called?”

“I don't know,” he answered a bit louder. “She never told me.”

“She?”

Sasuke almost snorted at the brief pang of jealousy he heard in Karin's voice. The girl was foolish if she thought she actually had a chance with him. He wasn't trying to be arrogant, but he knew that all Karin wanted was a rock star boyfriend that she'd get bored with in a few weeks.

“Sakura. My annoying girlfriend... Ex-girlfriend. I don't freaking know,” he said curtly. “She wrote this stupid song. She wrote the lyrics and the music. It said ‘Flake’ at the top of the page, so I guess that's the title.”

“Oh—”

“I bet she thought she was being so bloody subtle,” Sasuke muttered, strumming harder than he should have. “It's pretty sad that she put all her stupid *feelings* into writing songs and music she'd never even freaking play for anyone.” He snorted to himself and abruptly stopped playing. “Ah, but I guess I'm being a hypocrite.”

“I—”

“What the heck do you see in me?” he asked, staring into her eyes.

Karin's jaw dropped slightly at the blunt question. “W-What?”

“Don't play stupid.” Sasuke rolled his eyes and tucked his pick in between the strings of his guitar. “I'm not blind, Karin, and it doesn't take a genius to know that you like me, so tell me, what the heck is it that you're crushing on? What the heck did Sakura miss that she decided I was so damn terrible she had to *leave*?”

The redhead appeared to be shocked by Sasuke's outburst, judging by the troubled look on her face and furrow in her brow.



“Sasuke—”

“You didn’t love her.”

Sasuke looked to where Ino was, drying off some glasses with a furious glare.

“You were never there, Sasuke,” Ino stated, putting the cups down and then walking towards him. “All you ever gave a shit about was your music and your career. Sakura cared so much about it too that she put her own stuff on hold to help you make money to pay for all the stuff you wouldn’t let *daddy* put on his credit card.” She threw the rag in her hand at him, missing his head when he side-stepped it. “All she cared about was *you* but you were never there!”

“What the heck do you know—”

“More than you!” she shot back. “A lot more than you! Sakura’s my best friend. Obviously she told me about all of her problems with you.”

“There *were* no problems,” Sasuke growled. “There was *nothing*.”

“And that’s exactly it!” Ino exclaimed. “There was nothing! Nothing at all! You treated everything about the two of you as nothing! She wanted someone who would love her and cherish her! She’s just...” Ino shrugged and stared at him like he was the biggest idiot in the world. “She was tired of waiting.”

Ino’s voice died down and she sighed tiredly.

“She was so tired of *trying*.”

“So out of curiosity, Sasuke, do you think you can make time in your busy schedule to do something special with your girlfriend?”

Sasuke looked past his shoulder to where she was dressing up with her back to him, a towel still wrapped around her damp body. He couldn’t help but stare as she bent over to reach into the lower drawer where she kept her underwear. She stepped into her panties, pulling them up and under the towel.

“Yeah, I think that’s possible,” he murmured absent-mindedly, watching her drop the towel and slip her arms under the straps of her bra.

“That’s good,” she replied as she took out a nightgown and slipped it on. It was barely long enough to cover her thighs, but usually she just wore a t-shirt of his to bed. She turned around and brought the towel to her long hair as she began to dry the pink locks. “I was thinking we could go on a vacation next weekend to... well, anywhere, really.”

He frowned slightly. “Can’t. We have a show.”

“Okay, then the weekend after that?”

“Another show.”



“Alright...” Sakura gave him a tight smile as she hung the towel on the doorknob of the bathroom and began to run her brush through her hair. “Well what about the next weekend?”

Sasuke sighed and something pulled at her heart.

“Then Sasuke,” she drawled, staring at him dryly, “when is your next free weekend, huh?”

He shrugged, putting his guitar back on the small stand he had for it. “Not for two months, at the least...”

“I see.”

Sakura pulled at the covers on her side of the bed and lifted them so she could slip in. She laid her head down on the pillow and grimaced at the wet feeling her damp hair caused. Sasuke immediately followed suit, taking off his shirt and lying down next to her. He turned off the lamp on the night stand and stared at the dark ceiling.

“Remember when we were watching Closer?” she whispered. “I think that was a little after I moved in with you, actually...”

He nodded but did not open his mouth to reply.

“I told you I liked that feeling...” Sakura continued. “The one where your heart hurts so much and your chest aches and you almost want to cry—like when you’re losing someone or you’ve already lost them... but it only hurts because there’s love?”

A frown pulled at his lips but it was too dark for her to notice even if she was looking at him.

“Am I losing you, Sasuke?” she asked, turning on her side.

They couldn’t see each other in the dark but he knew she was staring at him.

Sasuke narrowed his eyes at the question, furious that she could even think of such a thing. He wrapped his hand around the arm she folded between them and pulled her to his body. She leaned her forehead against his chest and he placed his chin upon her head.

“Because this relationship really feels like it’s dwindling—”

“It’s not.”

“Are you sure?”

He could hear the hitch in her voice and knew she was trying not to cry.

“I am,” he said, loudly and confidently. “I’m sure. We’re fine.”

She nodded.

“I’ll hold you to that.”



Sasuke cleaned out what was once their apartment with glassy eyes and a bitter scowl.

Half a year had passed since she left and the sight of her stupid shoes, or the scent of her perfumes, or the sight of her clothes was driving him insane. They had a walk-in closet in their room but he let her use all of its space, preferring the drawers instead.

He found so many outfits she had never worn and a particular outfit she *had* worn that seemed to be fazing him.

It was a red, satin baby doll that she had worn on the night that they did eventually take their short vacation together over the weekend.

With a huff, he flung the offending piece of clothing across the large closet and stood up, not wanting to stay in there anymore. They were just clothes and shoes and purses but they were still hers and it still hurt to be reminded of her.

Sasuke stepped out and slammed the door behind him before sitting on the edge of the bed.

He had never bothered to clean the apartment of the things that belonged to her. Everything just seemed so in place, whether they were his or hers or *theirs*. He had left the photos on the shelves, her jewellery box on the bedroom vanity, her toothbrush in the holder it shared with his own.

Sakura was gone and he was finally realizing how much she meant to him.

Life was gonna be hell, he mused with regret, which was why he couldn't bear to change anything in their—*his* apartment.

He pushed himself off the bed and went to the shelf by the vanity, bending down to take out the scrapbooks she had put there. He found most of them empty as he flipped through the pages, but there was a medium-sized shoebox next to them that he knew was full of photographs. He then sat down in front of the shelf and removed the lid.

There were multiple, tiny stacks held together by rubber bands. Many more though, were tossed carelessly into the box.

He pulled out a pile and began looking over them nostalgically.

He snorted at the photos of the two of them celebrating Sakura's twenty-fourth birthday the previous year at Itachi's club. Sakura had been wearing a shiny, plastic crown that Naruto had picked up for her at the dollar store. She had worn the thing the whole day, even when they came back to Mangekyou in the evening for her night out.

In one picture, she had a bright smile on her face as she hugged his arm, the two of them looking at the camera.

Sasuke flipped to another photograph and felt a hollow pang in his chest.



It had been taken at the wedding of Sakura's uncle and coincidentally Sasuke's former guitar teacher, Kakashi Hatake. She wore a champagne-coloured cocktail dress and her long hair was pulled back into an elegant but casual bun. In her hands were the flowers that Kakashi's bride had thrown. She had a look of embarrassment on her face as she looked into the camera with a small gape, and Sasuke who stood beside her was blushing ever so slightly.

The next photo he took out was from a vacation they took together.

Sakura was the only one in the picture. She was sitting on the couch of the cabin they rented in the Snow Country in a tank top and her bath robe. She was holding a mug of coffee while looking over her shoulder with an amused grin as the picture was taken, obviously by him.

Sasuke let out a pained grunt that he didn't know he was holding in and closed his eyes with difficulty, afraid of what he might see.

He took a ragged breath and let go of the print in his hand.

He put the photos back into the box and closed it.

They had gone to the Snow Country and rented a cabin for themselves for the weekend. Sasuke had always enjoyed snowboarding, and Sakura, skiing, so they had no plans of staying cooped up in the wooden lodge for the whole trip.

All of Saturday was spent on the slopes but towards the evening, there was a raging storm that kept them stuck in their cabin.

"I think you broke the heater," Sakura said with an amused grin, donning only a short red baby doll and her panties. It was too hot in their little cottage to wear actual clothes. At least though, the heater was working too high rather than too low and they weren't coming down with hypothermia.

Sasuke huffed and crossed his arms over his chest as he stepped away from the heater.

"Tch, whatever."

Sakura giggled at his childish attitude and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his lower abdomen from behind.

"It's okay," she murmured, brushing her lips against his back and causing him to stiffen under her touch. "I think I like it all hot like this. Kind of makes me want to—"

"You better shut up now," Sasuke growled out. She noticed how his head was bowed slightly and she was sure that if she were in front of him and not behind, she would see something akin to a predatory gleam in his dark eyes, "or I might do something I'll regret in the morning."



“Why would you regret it?” she asked, standing on her toes to touch the shell of his ear with her lips. She stuck out her tongue and licked him tauntingly. “I don’t think I’d have a problem with anything—oh, hey, Sasuke!”

She giggled loudly as he threw her over his shoulder and started walking to the bed.

“Hey, put me down!” Sakura whined. “I get motion sickness easily, Sasuke!”

He snorted. “That’s a lie. We spent the whole day rushing down the hills.”

“Oh...” Sakura gave up and decided to use physical measures instead. She squirmed in his grip as she repeatedly slapped him on the back. “Sasuke! Put me down! This is making me nervous! I know you’re going to drop me—”

“Nice panties.”

“You’re such a pervert!”

“Hn.”

“Ugh, you totally suck—ow! HEY!”

Sakura pouted at him from where he threw her on the bed with her lips pursed and eyes narrowed. Childishly, she stuck her tongue out at him.

“You better put that away, Sakura,” he warned huskily, kneeling over the bed.

“Or what, Sa-su-ke?” she challenged, struggling to sound confident but failing.

He then pounced on her, grabbing her wrists in each hand and holding them to the sides of her head as he slanted his mouth across her own. He kissed her hotly and pressed his tongue against her lips, parting them without bothering to ask for entrance. Her legs wrapped themselves around his hips and she pulled him closer.

“I love you,” she declared between breathy moans as his hands roved over her nearly naked body.

She lifted her head to press her lips on his and kissed him over and over as she repeated her words.

“I love you.”

Eight months had passed since Sakura disappeared from his life. As the cool spring breeze drifted past him, he sipped on his coffee and continued walking down the street. He downed the rest of the warm liquid and threw the Styrofoam cup into the nearest trashcan. With a small yawn, he adjusted the guitar strapped to his back as he stepped into a corner store.

“Give me a pack of Marlboros,” Sasuke said to the man behind the counter. As the old man turned around to get his order, Sasuke’s eyes drifted to the magazine rack



beside the cash register and the bright letters that spelled *Allurement*. He stared at the magazine for a moment before taking one and adding it to his pack of cigarettes. “Oh, and this, too.”

The man nodded and punched in the price.

After paying, Sasuke walked out of the store with a cigarette dangling between his lips and the magazine rolled up in his hand. He walked silently to the city park with his earphones in place and his iPod playing, almost anticipating reading what Sakura left him for.

Sasuke sat down on a bench after leaning his guitar against it. He unrolled the magazine and began flipping through the pages as he lit a second cigarette.

He was about to deem it pointless until he saw *her* name.

He carefully read through the page and noted that Sakura had apparently been given an advice column.

A small smile almost made its way to his face, because he really felt Sakura deserved it. She deserved a nice job, especially one that suited her.

Dear Sakura,

My boyfriend and I are having a bit of trouble right now. It’s almost like the past amazing five years between us never took place! He doesn’t talk to me anymore and barely spends time with me. What happened? Did he just lose interest? Is he cheating on me? I’m just so confused. What should I do?

Confused,
Mai

The irony caused him to snort.

Dear Mai

I should probably tell you not to worry because your situation isn’t uncommon. Even I went through it. My best advice is to take a break from your relationship and just use the time to find yourself. Obviously the two of you changed into different people over the course of your relationship and you’re no longer the same. That’s okay, though. As long as the two of you still love each other, Mai, there’s still hope.

Sincerely,
Sakura



“Ah, swaying the other way now that Sakura left, I see?”

Sasuke looked up and scowled.

“Kakashi,” he muttered in greeting. He closed the magazine and put it on the bench carelessly. “What do you want?”

“Oh, just visiting my favourite student,” the older man drawled, taking a seat beside Sasuke. “I heard your career is doing pretty good, and fast. I always knew you had *it*.”

Sasuke nodded absently, still taking small glimpses at the magazine on his side.

“I also heard that your muse decided to leave you,” Kakashi added. He smiled at Sasuke wryly and reached over him to retrieve the abandoned magazine. “Sweet girl, she is, although rather naïve. If I had been her, with how much you pushed that girl away, I would’ve left you much sooner.”

He sighed and looked at Kakashi with a bitter frown.

“So I’m the bad guy, right?” he asked sarcastically. “It’s my entire fault?”

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. “You thought otherwise?”

Sasuke glared at him for a moment before turning away shamefully.

“She’s coming back you know...” Kakashi said slowly, breaking the awkward silence. He put a hand on Sasuke’s shoulder and narrowed his visible eye when he noticed the cigarette in the boy’s mouth. Kakashi immediately ripped it out and threw it on the ground, “Now, now, I haven’t seen you doing that since you were nineteen, Sasuke.”

He rolled his dark eyes at the statement and took out another one, shifting a few seats down on the bench.

“Yeah, well, when I started dating Sakura, she wouldn’t let me kiss her if I smoked,” Sasuke admitted. He played with the lighter in his hand, wondering if he should light it or not. “She said it made me taste bad and that it was a pain to wash the smell out of my clothes.”

Kakashi smiled faintly. “She was really good for you, wasn’t she?”

Sasuke sighed and tried not to look regretful.

“Yeah, she was.”

Checking one last time, Sasuke confirmed that Sakura was asleep. Carefully, he pushed the covers off of his body and crept out of their bed. He stood up and went to the jacket he always wore that Sakura had hung up on the door, reaching into the inside



pocket to take out his cigarettes. He went over to the balcony and quietly closed the door behind him, cautious not to wake Sakura.

He didn't smoke that often now that he was with Sakura. The times that he did smoke, though, were when she definitely would not know.

"Don't even think about putting that in your mouth," she had warned him when they first started dating. As usual, he had ignored her request and smoked the cigarette, and that night when he moved to kiss her good night she turned away and went home, saying, "Sorry, Sasuke, but you taste nasty when you smoke. I don't want to kiss you."

He quit ever since.

But he was feeling stressed lately.

His parents had been calling him a lot, asking him to come home so he could start working for them. They owned a chain of five-star restaurants in the Fire Country and were currently opening some in other cities. They claimed it was time for Sasuke to stop trying to be a musician and put his business degree to use for them.

His older brother had recently opened up a club that was declared a new hot spot for celebrities. Since Itachi and Sasuke had always had a close relationship, the elder allowed his brother and his band to play there a lot and refused to report anything to their parents.

With a sigh, Sasuke took the delicate stick out of the box and put it to his lips. He leaned against the railing and took out his lighter.

"Don't even try."

Had he been anyone else, he probably would have jumped at the sound of Sakura's cold voice.

Sasuke turned around and saw her standing in front of the glass sliding doors, glaring at him and daring him to try smoking the cigarette.

He stared back at her for a minute with the unlit cigarette still dangling between his lips before shrugging and taking it out. He put it back in the box and struggled to stay still when she took the pack and threw it over the balcony rather carelessly.

"You know," he drawled snidely. "Some little kid might find that and decide to smoke them."

Sakura shrugged. "Well, everyone is allowed to experiment a little." He raised an eyebrow at her and she repeated, "A little." She reached for the lighter he held between his fingers and put it in the pocket of her bathrobe. "But they shouldn't get addicted."

"I'm not addicted," Sasuke muttered. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her closer to take back what she put in her pocket. "I'm just... a bit stressed."



“Oh?” There was a look of curiosity in her eyes. She suddenly grew nervous as she looked away from him at the night sky over the balcony. “You... you know you can talk to me Sasuke, right?”

Sasuke nodded slowly. “I do.”

“Then will you?” she asked rather forcefully. “I care about you, Sasuke.” Sakura put her hands on his face, cupping his cheeks in her palms while staring into his dark eyes. “I’m here for you. I love you.”

He nodded once more and leaned his forehead against hers. “I know.” Slowly, he lifted his arms wrapped them around her form in a loose embrace.

After a moment, she pulled away and grasped his hand within her own. “Let’s go back inside,” she murmured with a light smile, pulling him along with her. As she walked, he made no move to follow. She turned around and frowned slightly. “What’s wrong—”

“Thank you.”

Her frown deepened and she tilted her head a little. “What do you mean? Is something wrong—”

“Thank you,” Sasuke repeated. “You... You’re always saving me...”

“It was just a cigarette—”

“From everything. From myself. From...”

He looked down and she could see a faint blush on his usually pale cheeks.

“Thank you.”

She paused to think over his words before nodding. A small smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

“You’re welcome.”

Sasuke awoke to a faint knock on his door. He had fallen asleep on the couch once again, something he had been doing for the past year without Sakura.

The near-silent taps against the door came once more and Sasuke stood up to answer it. He frowned slightly, annoyed by how quiet the knocks were, as if whoever was there didn’t want to be heard by him.

He opened the door and was greeted by the sight of Ino, her blue eyes narrowed and lips pursed. She did not bother greeting him before she reached into her purse and took out a folded piece of paper, shoving it into his chest for him to grab.

“She asked me to give that to you,” Ino explained.



He raised an eyebrow at her, because really, when was the last time Ino had spoken to Sakura?

Ino shrugged in response to his unspoken question. “I know, she told me to give it to you a year ago, but hey, I did it didn’t I?”

Sasuke nodded faintly, pocketing the folded sheet.

“She’s...”

The blonde girl sighed as she squirmed under the harsh scrutiny of his gaze.

“She’s coming back, you know,” Ino mumbled, as though she didn’t want him to know. “She didn’t want to write in fashion, anyways. She just wanted a year’s worth of experience at a famous magazine because she said it’d look good on her resumé.” The woman sighed under her breath. “Sakura... She’s coming home in a few weeks.”

His dark eyes suddenly lit up at the news and he was quick to ask, “When?”

Immediately, Ino narrowed her eyes once more, as if she was suspicious of him.

“Two Saturdays from now, I’m supposed to pick her up from the Konoha train station,” Ino explained slowly, watching Sasuke for any sort of reaction. “She said her train will be arriving around eight in the evening, and I have work.” She cleared her throat. “Do you think *you* can pick her up, Sasuke?”

“I have a show,” Sasuke said instinctively, because really, he did.

“I see.” Her rose-painted lips straightened into a line as she gazed at him coolly. “But you’ll cancel it, right Sasuke?”

“O—of course,” he muttered, cursing himself for stuttering. “I will.”

“Good.”

Ino gave him a curt nod before poking her head into the apartment and looking around. She had a calculating gaze as she scrutinized every inch of the room as if she was looking for some sort of mistake or change he made.

“Everything looks the same,” Ino commented dully, pulling back into the hall.

Sasuke shrugged.

“I never wanted things to change.”

Sasuke,

If you're reading this then that means Ino actually listened to me.

I don't know why I'm writing this, to be honest. Maybe for closure, right? I've always hated loose ends, so it would be hypocritical of me to not at least give you that. I can only hope that Ino doesn't wait ten months or whatever to give this to you.



Sasuke, I loved you.

I did.

You mean the world to me and leaving you is almost the hardest thing I've ever done, but I did it and now I feel fine. I wanted forever with you. I wanted to be by your side as you became a star, I wanted to move out of that crummy apartment we have and get a house, I wanted us to get married and have kids and a dog.

I wanted everything with you.

What happened to us? We used to be so good together, Sasuke, so what happened?

Did you find someone else?

Were you finally just sick of me?

Did you just fall out of love—or were you just never in love with me in the first place?

You just stopped talking to me entirely. You were so cold, Sasuke, and it hurt. It was almost like you just stopped caring about me.

I'm not stupid, though. I know you didn't stop caring. But you kept pushing me away and distancing yourself from me. Believe me, I tried to push the insecurities away, but Sasuke, I don't know, it just wasn't working.

I tried to wait. I tried to tell myself that whatever was wrong with you was just a phase and that if I gave you time, you'd be the man I fell in love with again, but it just never happened, Sasuke.

Eventually, it became too much and I guess I just wanted out.

I think I'm over you now.

I know that's not very believable considering I just told you I loved you and begged you to give me a reason to stay, but Sasuke, I think waiting for you to love me back just began to take its toll on me, you know?

You just started to fade from my memories and well, I don't know, fall into history.

I wish you so much luck with your career and hope you go far. Music is your passion and I would never ask you to choose me over it.

Maybe when I come back, if you figure out how much I just might mean to you and there's still something in me for you, we can try again.

All the best, Sasuke.

I guess this is goodbye, huh?

I think I'll miss you, Sasuke. And really, thank you for everything.



Love,
Sakura

Sakura shifted uneasily as the rain began to pour down harder, berating herself for going outside of the train station. Ino had said she'd be there to pick her up and that she'd even arrive half an hour early, but Sakura should have known that a year wasn't enough to help her friend's skills—or the lack thereof—in punctuality.

She sighed and dropped her duffel bag onto a bench and removed her messenger bag, tossing it on top of the larger one.

She shivered slightly as the droplets hit her bare arms and ran down her skin, tracing a chilly, wet path.

"You're really back..."

Her eyes widened briefly at the voice and she thought for a moment that she was still on the train, dreaming.

She looked over her shoulder and her breath hitched at the sight of him. His dark eyes were rimmed with black, showing the sleep he'd been missing out on, and his skin seemed paler than before. He looked older, as though more than a year had passed for him.

"Sakura," he said, a faint smile showing on his lips.

She didn't know what to do or say. She stood there under the rain, staring at him, almost hoping he wasn't real.

"Sakura, I'm sorry," he apologized, heading towards her. She took a step back and he flinched. Sasuke looked pained for a moment by her silence. He grabbed her upper arms and held her gently in place. His dark eyes locked with hers and he stared at her almost pleadingly. "Sakura..."

"W-What are you doing here?" she murmured, finally speaking to him.

Something in his heart fluttered at the mere sound of her angelic voice.

"I need you," he declared, staring into her eyes. "Sakura. Please—"

"No."

Her jade eyes glazed over and he no longer saw any warmth in them.

"No," Sakura repeated. "We're not—"

"Why?" he whispered.

"I get it now, okay?" His voice was harsh and husky. "I hurt you and pushed you away. And maybe you needed to leave because then I wouldn't have fucking realized—" He paused, controlling himself; because he just didn't want to acknowledge, didn't want



her to know, that he was feeling this ache that she was probably talking about. “But I get it now—and I...”

Sasuke bowed his head, his voice lowered.

“I need you, Sakura,” he said once more. “So please...”

He then lifted his head and she swallowed harshly at the broken look in his eyes.

“Just take me back.”

He wrapped his arms around her loosely and pressed his forehead against hers. She shuddered at the feel of his warm breath brushing against her chilled skin. Both ignored the rain that continued to fall, dripping along their faces.

“Just *come home*.”

“Why didn’t you write to me? Why? It wasn’t over for me! I waited for you for seven years and now it’s too late!”

“I wrote you 365 letters. I wrote you everyday for a year.”

“You wrote to me?”

“Yes. It wasn’t over, it still isn’t over!”

And as The Notebook played and Noah kissed Allie, Sakura couldn’t help but squeal happily and squeeze Sasuke’s arm even tighter. The two of them were on the couch watching movies together, once again, and that night just so happened to be Sakura’s pick.

“I love this movie,” Sakura gushed, pressing her cheek against his shoulder as she leaned on him. “It’s just too sweet!”

Sasuke let out a quiet snort and ate some more popcorn.

“Definitely,” he muttered. “Way too sweet.”

She looked up at him with a glare but the mood of the movie eventually got to her and she kissed him on the cheek.

“But seriously,” Sakura said, poking at his arm. “You totally have to agree that this movie is just a classic for a romantic like me.”

Sakura watched as the couple on screen kissed one another against the wall. It seemed so hot and romantic but still tragic and frantic all at the same time as they pressed their mouths against each others and pulled desperately at each other’s clothing.

She smirked up at Sasuke and patted him lightly on the cheek.

“Hm, I’m getting kinda hot for you, Sasuke.”

He rolled his eyes and shoved her away from him.



Sakura laughed loudly at her boyfriend's reaction and then laid her head against the arm at the other end of the couch. She propped her legs onto his lap and grabbed the couch pillow to hug as she continued to watch the movie.

Sasuke sighed and slouched, sliding down the couch slightly.

"Aw, does Sasucakes not like the movie?" she teased, knowing the answer quite well.

He grunted.

At his lack of response, a small smile pulled at her lips. "Ah, Sasuke..." she murmured, sounding rather serious. "Thanks for watching with me. I know you don't want to."

"I never said that," he muttered.

"Yeah, but you really don't need to," she replied. Sakura dropped the pillow she was cuddling on the floor and sat up to go back to her original position. She pecked him lightly on the cheek. "But really, you're such a sweetheart."

"Whatever."

The rainy scene concluded and Sasuke visibly frowned.

"Isn't that a bit cliché?"

Sakura looked at him, eyes wide at him suddenly making a comment on the movie. "What?"

"This," he said, gesturing to the television where the movie was playing. "A reunion in the rain? This is a little cliché, don't you think?"

She smiled and shrugged.

"Clichés always work."

"A reunion in the rain with you asking me to come back," Sakura whispered to herself observantly, looking up at the dark sky, letting the rain hit her face. "All you need to do now is kiss me..."

Sakura looked at Sasuke, feeling oddly whole with his arms around her. She ignored the rain that was growing stronger and now drenching her hair and dripping down her face. The water was probably seeping into her bags.

"This is a little cliché, don't you think?"

Her voice was almost a whisper and barely audible above the loud splashes of the rain.

She chuckled weakly and placed a hand on his damp head, pulling lightly on his hair.



“Clichés always work,” he murmured.

Slowly, Sasuke let go. He pressed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes. He brought a hand up and tangled it into her pink locks, pulling her head back and slanting his lips over hers.

As she fell into his kiss, she allowed herself to let go of the past.

She wasn’t lying when she said she’d be alright by herself.

“I love you.”

But still, she *loves* him—and so *does* he—and she would choose *them*, over and over again, above anything in the world.

Je Ne Sais Quoi

Thursday, 12:57 P.M. Sometimes she wondered if she could just delete mental images. Sometimes she wished she had the power to segregate her thoughts, so she could choose which memories to remember and which memories to forget. The cafeteria beside the Architecture building. The scent of earth after it rained. The intricate stone statues outside the university library. Machiavelli’s political ideas. Tattered and wet medicine books. A sullen boy approaching her in the locker room. Hanging out under their tree between class assignments. The bitter taste of coffee in her mouth.

It was on that rainy day at the school cafeteria when she found something that she wasn’t looking for... He entered, deposited his soggy umbrella inside the umbrella rack, made his way to the table adjacent to hers, and ordered a cup of coffee.

She didn’t mean to stare at him—no, ogling at strangers wasn’t really her hobby—but something about the man’s demeanor, the way he sat and the calculated manner in which he stirred his coffee, made the curiosity get the better of her.

There wasn’t anything special about him, really, except that he was good-looking and mysterious—black hair, black eyes, black shirt, heck, even his book was black—but what caught her attention the most was how he carried himself. She observed the way he sat on his chair, elegant and straight and aristocratic—almost princely; she caught the crisp sounds that he made as he deftly turned the pages of his book; she was amused with the disinterested expression of his eyes and the calculated but graceful movements of his arm.

It was frustrating to watch him drink his coffee for he did it without any trace of emotion, no sign of satisfaction, no knitting of eyebrows, nothing. He seemed to enjoy stirring his coffee and he would wait until the bitter concoction stopped swirling inside





his cup (that was, according to her own assumptions), before he'd take another sip and go back to stirring it again.

Eventually, Sakura got bored and shifted her attention back to the thick Biology book on the table.

Pseudostratified ciliated columnar...



Transitional epithelium...

Calvaria...

She sighed. There're days that were just not meant for studying.

It had been raining for hours already and the dark nimbus clouds outside meant that the rain would not be stopping any minute. Fortunately, it waned a little; it's the perfect time to go home.

(It might get worse again and she was not the kind of person who relished the feel of raindrops against her skin.)

She forced herself to finish her raspberry danish in one bite, downing it with a swift swig from her glass of pineapple juice. She collected her books, threw them inside her backpack, and stood up to get her umbrella from the rack beside the entrance. Little did she know that that moment would change her life, her dreams, her goals, the way she viewed coffee cups and umbrellas, her hatred towards rain, her everything.

"That's mine."

It was the guy she was observing earlier.

She didn't respond for a matter of seconds and just gawked at him stupidly, and then at the umbrella in her hands.

Realization was slow and embarrassing.

It was not hers, the handle just looked similar to the one she owned.

"Uh... of course, it's yours."

Forced, sheepish laughter.

In response, he took the umbrella from her hands, and left without another word.

Life had a funny way of giving Sakura the exact opposite of what she wanted, like putting her in situations she'd rather not be in.

Which explained why she found herself face-to-face with the man from the cafeteria for the second time in two days.

She was tired and groggy after finishing a practical exam at the laboratory, and to make things worse, it was raining again. She stayed under a shed, stranded along with other commuters, still wearing her pure white uniform and waiting for the downpour to subside.

She was simply looking for someone who could share an umbrella with her, seeing that the one she had got destroyed when a sudden gust of wind blew against it.

And it just happened that the only person she *knew* (if staring and having a slight misunderstanding with made someone an acquaintance) was him.



Perfect.

He was standing there, just a few feet away from the shed, holding the midnight blue umbrella she recognized. She decided to put aside her pride and act like they really knew each other.

“Hey!”

His head didn’t turn towards her direction, but she knew that he was already conscious of her presence.

“What?”

She mimicked his accent. “It’s raining.”

It’s obvious you know.

“So?”

“Well, my umbrella got broken,” she explained, sweet smile, pleading voice and all, “and I don’t really like to get wet.”

He remained apathetic.

“Your point?”

“Well, I was thinking if you could share your umbrella with me.” She motioned to the umbrella he was holding, slightly raising her voice to fight the loud patters of the rain.

Nothing.

“Please?” She pointed the other side of the road. “Just take me across the street and you can go. From there, I can find my way to the train station without getting wet.”

Still nothing.

“I will pay you if you want! But don’t overcharge... I don’t have enough money left here...” She carelessly reached for her purse, but that made her books fall to the wet, muddy ground.

What the hell.

She immediately stepped outside the shed to pick her books up, but that resulted to her getting soaked by the rain.

Shitshitshit this day... She cursed to herself.

He grabbed one of her books from the muddy ground and shielded her from the rain with his umbrella.

“This is all your fault,” Sakura snapped, gritting her teeth. The statement was supposed to make her sound angry and accusing but it only succeeded in making her sound frustrated. Those books meant so much to her.



“Fine,” he sighed, taking the other two books from Sakura’s grasp. His clothes were now smudged with dirt and mud, and she just stated that it was his entire fault.

So much for taking responsibility.

“Take me to the train station or else I won’t forgive you and I will make you pay for these books or you could just give me your umbrella because this is all your fault anyway!”

Angry. Demanding. Without even a pause to catch her breath.

“Fine.”

“Fine. Just *fine*?”

“Pay for the books or take you there?” He seemed to be getting annoyed too, his black jacket already stained with dirt from the books.

“W-Well...”

Can I choose both?

When did she realize that she felt something for Sasuke? It wasn’t when she first saw him at the cafeteria or when she obliged him to share his umbrella with her, even if that was how she got his name.

It wasn’t when she started approaching him every time she saw him alone. She always did that and she enjoyed talking to him even if she was the one who only did the talking.

Sasuke always remained subdued whenever they were together, but she knew that he was listening. He would shrug, or sigh, or roll his eyes, or make those unfriendly and barely audible noises, so she would know if he was interested or not. His replies weren’t the type that would encourage conversations, but it wasn’t the type that would tell her to go away either.

It wasn’t when she saw him obsessively stirring his coffee again, not when she caught him perusing a Niccolò Machiavelli book at the university library, not when she first got an acceptable answer from him.

Maybe it was when they started being friends (for lack of a better term). Maybe it was when he told her about his opinion on communism, or when he explained why he loved stirring his coffee in a clockwise then counterclockwise direction, or when they started going to the cafeteria together. Maybe it was when they first sat down under a shady tree and simply talked.

“I have an idea,” she enthusiastically announced one afternoon while wading through one of her medical books. She leaned against the tree trunk and stole a glance at the man lying on the grass beside her.



He remained impassive and, knowing him, she took this as a sign to continue. “Why not make a study on inhibited sexual desire among couples who lack verbal and non-verbal communication?”

“Who would be interested in that?” He kept his eyes closed.

“Well, I just want to work on something unique and...”

“That’s already been studied on.”

She raised an eyebrow. “How do you know?”

He let out an exasperated sigh and looked at her. “Why are you here?”

“Hey, you’re changing the topic—”

“Why are you here?” he repeated. Monotonous. Apathetic.

“Just passing by... I guess.”

Again.

Forced, clumsy laughter.

“What?”

“What?”

“Why? When? How? Where?”

He turned his head to the other side, uninterested.

Annoying.

“Don’t you...want my company?”

“No.”

“What no?”

No reply.

Her smile faded and was replaced by a frown.

“Then bear with me. So, what was I saying?”

You’re annoying too, you know.

She found out that despite how shallow she perceived Sasuke to be (with his poker face and monosyllabic replies (which she found amusing (which she would never admit to him (even if she was always tempted to do so))), he still possessed an unfathomable depth within him.

He was mysterious and quiet and snobbish (“But not rude,” she defended when Shikamaru implied otherwise). He was a genius to the point of being a nerd (“He’s too handsome to be a nerd!” declared her inner self).



She told him how she was deprived of any culinary skill, how she always forgot her umbrella at home, how she managed to budget her monthly expenses (not that he really cared), and how she pursued her dream of becoming a nurse despite her mother's protests. She apologized for imposing on him when they first met; he just grunted as usual. She shared almost everything about her. All she got were his name and his political ideas in return.

Maybe she didn't know where everything started, how they eventually became what they were (whatever their relationship was) and why her heart pounded every time she saw him.

Maybe reasons didn't really matter at all.

"I'm almost done... Okay, I'll wait." She pressed the end call button, her heart betraying her again.

She couldn't help but feel embarrassed about the fact that she was always excited to see him.

It wasn't the first time Sasuke would pick her up. Many times, she would make some lame excuse to see him, expecting that he would turn her down. She knew he was aware of what she was up to, but still she asked him to lend her a hand about something.

He would always say no, that he didn't want to.

But he would always show up.

"And dreaming of your touch, it's all too much! You know, I don't have any choice!" she sang ardently, waving her arms and enjoying her reflection on the window, caught up in her own world in the laboratory and at the music she was playing.

He didn't arrive late, likewise didn't say he was already there before she saw him.

She insisted to take the bus when the rain pelted down unexpectedly. It was overloaded with passengers and they were lucky enough (thanks to Sasuke) to occupy the backseat.

"I hate these moments," she told him.

Her mood changed from being bubbly to being conscious of his presence. She felt awkward because of the fact that all of the passengers were squashed together, yet he still left a small distance between them.

Not that she truly wanted to be pressed against his weight and by the others who were sitting beside him. Rather, it was because the passengers on his side were openly complaining and asking him to move and give more space, sensing that Sakura wasn't having a hard time unlike them.



He didn't budge. He simply closed his eyes, earphones tucked securely in his ears, ignoring their presence with dignity.

(Or, Sakura mused, maybe he had not really heard them.)

Despite the fact that the people were vexed with the two of them, she couldn't help but hide a small smile and the warm tingles she felt because of his simple gesture.

"What kind of music do you listen to?" she asked after a few minutes, somewhat bored at the long journey, attempting to start a conversation. She let out an irritated sigh when he didn't reply. "Of course, you can't hear me," she added sarcastically, noting that he was busy selecting music on his mp3 player.

She shifted her attention towards the window. It was still raining hard.

The bus halted abruptly, causing Sakura's head to bump slightly against the seat in front of her. She scowled uncomfortably, just like the other passengers.

The bus started to dash again.

She looked at Sasuke who seemed unperturbed the whole time.

"You're not a good singer—" came his direct, unsolicited reply.

"Huh?"

"—and dancer."

"Eh? What are you—?"

She always remained clueless whenever he was the first one who started talking.

Then, it dawned her, remembering the scene in the laboratory earlier.

She had not been aware that Sasuke saw her singing and dancing and brooding freely alone in the laboratory.

"A-As if you could carry a tune! You're not a good singer either!" she defensively blurted out, cheeks reddening because of embarrassment. She had forgotten all about it when they entered the bus and began the unbearable ride.

"I am," he said artlessly.

She always found something about him that she disliked in men, but he wouldn't be Uchiha Sasuke if those traits weren't in him.

She sat on the library steps with her best friend Ino, waiting for Sasuke to return the book that she needed for her research. The intricate nude statues were witness to how they've endured the scorching heat of the afternoon sun.

"He needs to get here early," she nervously said. "Sasuke-kun still has a class later."



“No he doesn’t. Their professor will just tell them to write an essay,” Ino supplied. “I heard the professors from the social sciences department do nothing but make their students write papers. After that, they stash the documents and sell them to garbage collectors.”

Sakura raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you’re in speaking terms with professors.”

“No.” The blonde shrugged. “Shikamaru is a student assistant, remember?”

“I didn’t know you’re in speaking terms with Shikamaru.”

Ino just shrugged again, combing her golden locks with her fingers. “I don’t really know how you manage to stay with that guy, Sakura.”

“What?”

She waved her hand impatiently. “Look, don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m saying, Forehead. It’s been months since you two got together and... he still hasn’t explicitly said that he likes you too.”

“Yeah yeah, you’re just jealous Ino-pig.”

“Excuse me?” She placed her hands on her hips in mock indignation. “How could you...you forehead girl! I’m concerned about you and then you say those kind of things?”

Sakura gently slapped her friend’s shoulder with a giggle.

“I’ll definitely hear it someday. It’s just a matter of time, I guess...so what’s the rush? I’m patient.”

I’m patiently waiting.

A deep sigh.

“Whatever. You’re really absurd.”

By then, Sakura already caught sight of Sasuke who, as far as she could remember, was frowning more than usual. She didn’t bother to ask, though. She was too busy thinking of how she would say thanks.

The day Sasuke first approached Sakura on his own free will was the day exam schedules for the semester were released.

He found her squinting in front of the bulletin board, fingers hastily typing her schedule on her cell phone. Sasuke waited for her to finish copying everything before tapping her shoulders.

“Sasuke-kun!” Sakura exclaimed, beaming like a little girl would when offered candy.



“Don’t smile like that.”

“What’s a pre-law student doing in a nursing building?”

He offered his midnight blue umbrella to her. “There’s a storm coming.”

Sakura stared at him and the umbrella in his hand. It took a while before her mind processed the situation. “Sasuke-kun... I love you too.” She made a move to embrace the man in front of her but he sidestepped just in time to avoid her.

She pouted.

“Meet me at the cafeteria tonight.”

The tranquil sound of the rain against the stone pavement. Making her way against students who were already on their way home. Passing by the muddy floors of the Architecture building, which was beside the cafeteria. Feeling intensely excited and happy on her way to their date (according to her, yet again).

Friday, 7:45 P.M. She watched his back as he opened the door of the cafeteria to leave. Her memories were vivid and hazy at the same time. She really didn’t know the purpose of their meeting; she couldn’t remember how long they sat there.

She remembered arriving late. Sasuke was already seated at their usual table, scanning the pages of another thick book. She remembered herself secretly laughing at how nerdy he looked. He saw her, she apologized and he made the usual greeting which was composed of a simple ‘Hn’ and a gesture towards the seat in front of him.

She could smell the light scent of his cologne as she took her seat.

They talked about the usual stuff in their usual way—her, trying hard to continue the flow of conversation and him, shrugging and grunting and glaring and sarcastically commenting from time to time. Even so, she couldn’t recall what they talked about if they talked about anything relevant at all.

She jokingly invited him to walk her home but he ignored her offer.

“So that’s why you lent me your umbrella.”

“...”

“You just don’t want to accompany me and here I was thinking that you’re already starting to show a form of affection or something.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re so cold... you shouldn’t be saying that to me.”

He continued stirring his coffee like he didn’t hear anything.



The hot liquid swirled gracefully against the stirrer.

Clockwise.

Counterclockwise.

Clockwise.

Counterclockwise.

She clasped and unclasped her hands and tried to ignore the weight that she felt in her chest.

“Did you... ever like me?”

She was sure that she saw his hand tensed for a second, but other than that, he gave no indication of interest in her question.

There had been no actual declarations that they were together, nor any sign that told her that he saw her the way she saw him. She was assuming, and it had always been like that.

“You can answer that question,” he blankly replied after a few seconds, this time flipping through the pages of the boring political book at his left.

She was relieved to hear those words from him (yet still internally anxious), but was reluctant to divert back to their original discussion.

A shrug. “Oh well. I’ll return this to you tomorrow same time, same place,” she coolly said, trying to sound unaffected. She playfully waved his midnight blue umbrella.

“I won’t need that anymore.”

It’s yours.

She pouted, but couldn’t keep herself from smiling at the present he gave her.

“It’s mine then.”

And that’s when everything became blurry.

Friday, 8:18 PM. She wanted to run after him but she was too dazed to do so. In the end, she felt contented sitting there alone while touching her lips and savoring the faint bitter taste of coffee in her mouth.

Thursday, 12:57 PM. Almost a week after their last encounter. She racked her brain to remember. She really did. But her thoughts couldn’t seem to focus on what was important. The black book which turned out to be his copy of *The Art of War*. The intricate stone statues. The muddy Architecture building. The soft pitter-patters of the rain against the pavement. The masculine scent of his cologne. The time he opened the door to leave.



He left her.

She tried to contact him; she even went to the College of Social Sciences to ask for his whereabouts. But he was gone.

Everything had become hazy... everything but the moment she saw him walking away from her. She wished she had followed him then, but regretting her past actions or lack thereof would not get her anywhere. She touched her lips and tried her best to remember but even if she did so, her mind couldn't find a plausible reason for her disquiet.

That night was supposed to be a mark of a beginning—their beginning—but tonight, as she lay on her bed, pink sheets covering her petite frame, Sakura doubted if there was even a connection between them in the first place.

The school cafeteria usually opens at 7:00 AM, but Sakura knew that Sasuke goes there at about 5:30 PM because that was when he did his papers. It was across a vast field of uncut grass and tall trees. During the rainy season, the field would become a muddy site which everyone avoided. This time, however, spring has arrived to mark the start of a new school year.

Sakura clutched her new books close to her chest, looking towards the cafeteria, waiting for someone to enter the place. Shikamaru, seeing what was about to happen again, sighed in resignation. The girl was hopeless.

Nonetheless, he still asked her if she wanted to go eat at a cheap barbecue restaurant with them. Sakura just cheerfully declined, saying that she'd spend the rest of the day to fix her things at the dormitory. Even so, she still remained rooted to where she was standing.

Shikamaru sighed yet again, weary, as he made his way to the sidewalk and motioned for Ino to do the same.

"She still hasn't given up."

"I can see that. If she continues doing this..."

"She'll go nuts and that'll be troublesome. How long has it been since Uchiha disappeared?"

"Almost half a year, I think."

"She should just give up. It's stupid to think Uchiha had any interest in her."

Ino glared. "Just shut up, okay? It doesn't help if you keep on repeating what's obvious."

Sakura knew it was absurd to keep holding on to something that even she was unsure of. She should've paid more attention to their last conversation. She should've run



after him when she had the chance. She should've asked him when they were still together.

She should not have assumed too much.

She knew her friends were right—that she should just give up on him—but she couldn't stop hoping. Telling yourself that you would forget a person was one thing, actually forgetting that person was another.

Sakura turned to Ino and smiled. "I guess I should just go with you guys."

Ino's sullen face lightened up. "That's the spirit."

1:00 P.M. Exactly twenty-seven months, eighteen hours, thirty-three minutes and six seconds since her last encounter with Sasuke. She could only remember the date and time now. All the other details—the conversation, the atmosphere, and the title of the book—had been buried at the back of her mind, memories that she would rather not visit again.

Today was supposedly the only day of her last summer vacation as a nursing student and instead of attending an orientation for her next hospital duty, Sakura chose to spend the day at her apartment.

"What the hell is up with the freaking sun?" Ino grumbled, desperately trying to cool herself with a makeshift fan made of thin cardboard. The air conditioning unit was already at its lowest temperature but it wasn't enough to fight the heat.

They were lazing around her small pad, eating the brownies they baked earlier, watching pointless TV soaps and laughing at the twisted fates of the leading ladies.

"Ah, don't whine like that," Sakura said, rolling her eyes at Ino's complaints. She stood up, went to the small green fridge adjacent the living room and took out two packs of ice milk. She preferred this than ice cream since it didn't contain too much butterfat.

She threw one to her blonde companion. "You make the weather worse by saying those things."

"Yeah whatever," came the impatient reply. Ino deftly caught the pack with her long fingers and leaped from her seat to get spoons from the kitchen. She returned and sat beside Sakura who was now lazily channel surfing.

Sakura huffed and started to feed on the sweet frozen food in her hands. "No good show," she mumbled and handed the remote control to Ino. She stood and looked out her window.

The view was boring. Her unit was at the fourth floor and all that she could see were the bars nearby, the bay that was a few streets away from where they were, and the traffic below. Oftentimes, she would observe the people walking past the pavements but



there were none of them today. Perhaps, they were also stuck in their own homes or swimming at the beach, enjoying ice cream or whatnot.

She licked her spoon and turned to Ino. “Hey, why don’t we invite the other girls for beach volleyball?”

“They’re busy with their practicums, remember?”

“Oh, sorry.”

A pillow came flying to her direction. She skillfully evaded it using her left arm. “Hey!”

“Tch.” The blonde crossed her arms. “You should be thinking about more important things. You know, like getting a job or choosing a specialization for med school.”

“Stupid. I’ve already planned my future since we were in third grade,” Sakura replied, returning to her previous sit.

“Oh sorry, genius,” Ino replied in jest, with just a hint of sarcasm in her tone. “Then maybe you should start looking for a boyfriend? I heard that you have a classmate who volunteers with you at the daycare center.” She winked at Sakura, who simply rolled her eyes at the comment.

“He’s just a friend, and I have more important things in mind.” The young woman mused, fighting the tingling sense of nostalgia building in her stomach. “Besides, it’s impossible for me to think about stuff like that when I have so much work to do. You know, school stuff, exams, my thesis proposal... you should start worrying about those too Ino-pig.”

“Ha! I have Shika for that,” Ino replied, sticking her tongue out.

“What would Shikamaru know about interior decoration? He’s a philosophy major, remember?”

“Bah. Whatever.”

She smiled to herself, happy that her friend had someone like that bum to help her with her studies.

She smiled without any tinge of bitterness, knowing she had already moved on. It’s just a matter of time now before she’d find the one who was truly meant for her.

The angry downpour of rain against the stone pavement. The muddy steps towards the store entrance. The long line to the cashier. The loud cries of the toddler in front of her. It was just another rainy Sunday morning at the grocery store. No significant event to look forward to except the opening of classes the following week.

But fate had other things in mind for Sakura.



Which explained why she found herself reeling at the sound of the man at the other line.

The low and subdued timbre of his voice. The economy of his words. The expressionless monotone.

Her hand flew to her mouth.

How could she forget?

It was Sasuke's voice after all.

Sakura irritably opened the maroon umbrella she previously bought at the grocery store a week ago. She had just exited their college building when the heavens started to grumble and tiny droplets of rain started falling from the gloomy sky.

Perfect timing.

She sighed, slowly making her way down the stone steps to the waiting shed. She watched as the raindrops slowly covered the steps, unconsciously noting that the scene before her seemed curiously familiar.

She raised her head from the ground to look at the solitary figure standing at the bottom of the stairs.

There he was standing right in front of her, ebony eyes staring straight at her emerald ones.

She had long imagined this moment—him coming back and her crying at the sight of him. She imagined all the pain he brought her coming back. She envisioned herself slapping him, punching him, and even ignoring his presence. She wouldn't let him get away with all the heartaches he caused her, wouldn't she?

But instead of feeling hurt or betrayed or angry, she felt nothing.

No anguish.

No pain.

Instead, she felt joy for the return of an old friend.

And despite herself, she smiled at him.

They found themselves sitting at their usual spot at the cafeteria where they first met. He ordered a cup of his favorite coffee and she asked for a mug of hot chocolate and a lovely sweet made with whipped chestnuts and almond paste.

This time though, Sakura felt awkward with the whole situation. After all, how should someone act around a person who left after he kissed her?



It seemed like Sasuke noticed her unease. “How’s school?” came the cool offer.

She waved her hands excitedly. “Oh, I’ve been doing great lately. In case you don’t know, I got the highest score in our latest battery exam. I’m cool like that.”

“Hn.”

She ignored his offhand remark, knowing that this was his way of indicating his interest (or disinterest) in the conversation. She continued talking, because she was aware that it would be hard for her to start another conversation if she didn’t go on with this.

“And you know the time when I was still thinking whether I should go to med school or not?”

Sasuke shrugged, eyes focused on the hot liquid inside his cup. Sakura fought the strong feeling of déjà vu overcoming her senses.

For the first time since they saw each other that day, she observed him. She noted how little change had occurred in him. She noticed he wasn’t wearing black this time, and the navy blue sweatshirt complimented his pale skin very well. He still smelled the same. He still drank his coffee in that graceful way of his.

But it wasn’t his appearance or his scent that mattered.

He was still distant and aloof, still silent and detached. She wondered why he left all of a sudden, without a warning, without a goodbye.

At least he went back to see her again.

“You were saying?”

She was snapped out of her reverie by the sound of his voice. “Oh sorry, I was just...” she trailed off and faked a laugh. “S-Sorry.”

Why the hell was she stuttering? She took a large bite off of her dessert and drank from her hot chocolate. “What was I talking about again?”

He shrugged. “Med school.”

“Oh yeah. So, uh... so like I was saying... I’ve finally decided to go to med school. Tsunade-sama, you know, our big-boobed dean... Well, she said I might get a scholarship if I do well this year; she said she would endorse me if I graduate with honors and...” A pause, to see if he was still listening. “And well... I figured that I should take pediatrics since I love children a lot. You see... I’ve been doing a lot of volunteer work at a daycare center. There’s this guy... He urged me to go there with him every weekend so that I wouldn’t have all my attention to my studies. I’ve been going there regularly for five months now. It’s really effective and... I enjoy their company a lot.”

She looked at him again. He was glaring at his coffee cup now. Maybe he was annoyed at her for rambling too much.



“You... haven’t changed much Sasuke-kun.” A rueful smile. “So what have you been up to lately? I haven’t heard from you since... well, you know.”

“Nothing much.”

She waited for him to add something more to his reply but he remained silent, his chin resting lightly on one hand, the other lazily stirring the contents of a white porcelain cup, as if coffee was the most important thing in the world. She sighed and traced the rim of her mug. “Like I said, you haven’t changed. At all.”

He looked at her.

“Umm... you know, still distant and mysterious and secretive...” she trailed off, not wanting to say something that might cause him to walk out on her. She mimicked him and focused her attention on her food.

The rest of their meal was spent in silence. But it wasn’t the uncomfortable silence that Sakura was accustomed to whenever she ate with Sasuke. Instead, the absence of conversation seemed to reassure them of the fact that the past didn’t matter anymore, that they were still friends despite what happened.

She savored every morsel of her dessert, not minding the length of time she was taking to finish it off. Sasuke had drained his coffee several minutes ago but he remained quiet and resigned himself to the image of her chewing carefully.

“I see you got a new umbrella.”

Sakura was taken off guard. “Sorry?”

“Sakura.”

She spluttered wordlessly for a few seconds, a response which, she thought, was embarrassing but acceptable since it was the first time he mentioned her name.

Their eyes met and a lingering moment of silence passed where all they could hear was the shrill music in the background, exceptionally bothering to both their ears, before Sasuke averted his gaze, looking for an escape route.

He opened and closed his mouth before muttering something indistinguishable under his breath.

He wasn’t the kind of person who would incite a conversation, and he knew that speaking without thinking could lead to inauspicious consequences. He surveyed his oh-so-precious coffee cup, contemplative.

Sakura knitted her eyebrows and focused on her food once again. Something was wrong with the man in front of her, though she couldn’t put a finger on it.

When she turned to look at him again, Sasuke was back to his usual self—composed, refined and indifferent. His eyes watched her impassively like nothing happened.



She took this as an opportunity to speak.

“I’m sorry,” she began, meeting his gaze. He looked away, giving no sign that he had heard her. She noticed his dark fine eyebrows tightening at the sound of her words, but she willed herself to continue, “I’m sorry... for being stupid back then. I-I didn’t mean to impose on you or anything. I just thought we could be—”

“You didn’t do anything stupid,” Sasuke cut her off in mid-statement, closing his eyes and folding his arms in front of him. His handsome features softened.

Sakura breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that there were no loose ends between them now.

“Sasuke-kun,” she said, making a move to leave. “I’m sorry I have to leave now. I promised a friend that I’d accompany him to the bookstore today, I’m really sorry.”

The man in front of her regarded her goodbye coolly.

“It’s nice seeing you again.” Sakura smiled. “Until next time?”

“Aa.”

“Until next time then.” She laughed, moving forward to give Sasuke a peck on the cheek. She waved goodbye and disappeared behind the cafeteria entrance, leaving him staring pensively at his coffee cup.

Sakura lay impassively on the soft mattress of her bed, counting the cracks on the ceiling. She had always enjoyed listening to music at night, with only her bedside lamp on, trying to clear her thoughts before lulling herself to sleep.

So what if the Uchiha Sasuke invited her out for a snack earlier? That couldn’t possibly mean anything to him at all.

*³And every time you notice me by
Holding me closely and saying sweet things
I don’t believe that it could be
You speaking your mind and
Saying the real thing*

She glared at her iPod and turned it off. She didn’t need a song to reiterate what happened between them. Granted, Sasuke never said or did anything sweet to her. Indeed, she had been too assuming then. And she wouldn’t want to formulate a wrong conclusion as to what had transpired earlier that day.

One mistake was enough.

Many things changed since he left. She never went back to that cafeteria, never used the umbrella he gave her, never hung out at the mango tree where she had always



caught him taking a nap. More than once, some of her classmates had tried to ask her out, but she never showed any interest in them except when someone suggested that she spend time with toddlers.

Her friends used to match her with guys in the campus, saying that they liked her, but she brushed them off, believing they only made things up to distract her.

She had used her distress as an excuse to do better in her studies, believing that it was the only way to forget Sasuke. She became the best among her peers, the first in every exam, and ahead of everyone.

It had been her fault for assuming too much and she had promised that she wouldn't repeat that mistake again.

True, she had gotten over him, but that didn't exempt her from being curious about his actions.

Stupid Sasuke. Always playing with her thoughts and feelings.

She wouldn't fall for him now. Not when she had finally learned how to go on with her life without thinking about him. Not when she had finally found other things to focus on.

"Special delivery!" came an unfamiliar booming voice outside the nurses' quarters.

Sakura's soft-spoken, white-eyed companion gave her an inquisitive stare. They had just finished their graveyard shift at the university hospital and they were still groggy from the work they did an hour ago.

The pink-haired woman returned the unspoken question with a confused look, not knowing what the din outside the door was all about. Sakura was about to stand up to open the door when the other girl motioned for her to stay where she was. "It's okay Haruno-san. I'll go check it out on my own."

She was greeted by the sight of several bouquets of roses. She found the source of the commotion—a wide-eyed, blond lad with a toothy grin—hidden behind the blossoms.

She blushed. "H-Hi, what can I do for you?"

"Are you Miss Haruno Sakura?" there went the booming voice once again.

"Umm no," she replied, gesturing for him to lower his voice, they were in a hospital after all. "How may I help you?"

"Well these flowers are for her." The blond offered her the bunch of flowers, dropping one on the floor.

"Hinata what's going on?" Sakura called from the inside.



“Uh, Sakura, this guy—” She regarded him with the same inquisitive look she gave the other student a while ago.

“Uzumaki Naruto at your service!” supplied the blond enthusiastically.

“Err... U-Uzumaki Naruto says these flowers are for you.” She bended over to help him pick up the bouquet he had dropped.

“Excuse me.” Sakura peered outside the door. “What can I do for you?”

“Whoa, I didn’t know that bastard has good taste in women! Sakura-chan is gorgeous!”

She flinched at the familiar tone the unknown person had used to address her.

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto!” He leaned closer, as if he was about to tell her a special secret. “Someone’s waiting for you at the hallway. He’s the one who asked me to deliver these flowers!”

Sakura regarded him warily, suspecting that Ino was playing a practical joke on her, but something about this Uzumaki Naruto told her to check if what he was saying was actually true.

Once all the bouquets were inside the quarters, she motioned for Hinata to wait for her as she followed Naruto to the aforementioned hallway. “You must be the unluckiest girl in the world Sakura-chan,” he said with mock seriousness, “for attracting a guy like that. But he has a number of good points too, if you get to know him more. When I first met him, I thought he was gay because I caught him listening to Taylor Swift songs in his iPod...”

When they rounded into a corner, she saw the person she least expected to see waiting for her, holding another bouquet of red roses and wearing what suspiciously looked like a tuxedo.

Naruto’s voice started to fade into the background.

Her green eyes widened in surprise and confusion as she examined him.

Sasuke pretended that he had not seen her, going over something written on a crumpled sheet of paper in his hands. His face scrunched slightly with what looked like annoyance or disgust before folding the paper neatly, each edge coming into contact with each other perfectly. He inhaled deeply before scowling at the wall in front of him.

Naruto sniggered behind her, before giving the pink haired woman a light push. “I’ll just stay behind this wall Sakura-chan. The bastard wouldn’t want me to see his performance.”

Sakura was unsure of what was happening but she still yielded to his request. She walked to where Sasuke was, who stiffened at the sight of her.

“O my Luve's like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June; O my Luve's like the melodie that's sweetly played in tune.”



Low. Emotionless. Unsure.

Sakura stopped dead on her tracks. “Eh? W-What?”

Sasuke threw her a half-annoyed, half-discomfited look, ignoring the mischievous glances the passersby were giving them, before returning his gaze to the wall in front him, as if delivering a speech. He reduced the volume of his voice to a low whisper, “As fair art thou, my bonnie lass, so deep in luv am I; and I will luv thee still, my dear, till a' the seas gang dry—”

Sakura blinked for a few moments.

Then, the words Sasuke were saying began processing in her head.

Her knees wobbled.

“—Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear, and the rocks melt wi' the sun; I will luv thee still, my dear, while the sands o' life shall run.” Sasuke hesitated, before looking straight into her eyes and giving her the flowers he was holding. Sakura noticed his fingers were reluctantly—well, trembling. “And fare thee weel, my only Luv, and fare thee weel awhile! And I will come again, my Luv, tho' it ware ten thousand mile.”

As soon as he finished reciting, Sakura started crying in front of him, grabbing the collar of his expensive clothes and punching him solidly on his stomach.

“How dare you play this kind of game with me you—you stupid, heartless, unfair, annoying, ugly piece of garbage...” she trailed off, unable to think of any more insults because of the strange heavy feeling building in her chest.

“Tch.” Sasuke glared at her, hands traveling to the place where she had just hit him.

When she didn't respond, he made a move to put his hands on her shoulder to stop her from crying, but she swiftly inched away from him, hands furiously rubbing the tears from her eyes.

“Stop it Sasuke... please,” she finally managed weakly, bowing her head down.

Sasuke frowned. “What do you want me to do?”

“What?” Sakura repeated his question, disoriented, her voice dripping with anger and confusion, “What are these flower-giving and poem recitation all about? Why are you doing these things now? You-You broke my heart; you left me feeling so bad about myself and now you suddenly come back with-with flowers and poems and light meals... How do you want me to react? Why are you asking me what to do now?”

Sasuke quietly stared at her for a few seconds and when he spoke again, all his confusion and annoyance had been replaced by a placid but earnest answer. “I came back for you. I—”

This time he was cut off by the bouquet of flowers smashing right into his face.



“I didn’t ask you to come back!”

It was the first time she snapped at him, glaring at him with all the hate she could muster. All the sorrow she bottled up for more than a year started welling up.

Some passersby stopped on their tracks and curiously stared at them to see what the commotion was all about: why there was a man dressed formally in a hospital, why the large bouquet of roses was slowly losing its petals.

Sasuke opened and closed his mouth uncharacteristically, possibly thinking about a plausible explanation to give her. Consequently put off, he remained silent, but still had enough time to grab Sakura’s wrist when she made a move to hit him again with the bouquet. Undeterred, she lifted her other hand to slap his shoulders but Sasuke’s reflexes were quick enough to catch her with his free hand.

They struggled for a few agonizing seconds, before Sakura finally succeeded in freeing her hand from Sasuke’s grip. She inhaled deeply.

Sasuke poised himself for another fit of rage, which came as quickly as he had expected.

Sakura started to cry harder, small hands weakly punching his broad chest. “I-I hate you! W-Why did you have to leave? Why did you make me think about you too much? I hate you!”

He let her do what she wanted, patiently waiting for her outburst to subside.

She thought she was okay.

She believed she was okay.

But why was she feeling this way again?

Her mind was silently having a lengthy and heated discussion with itself. One side told her to walk out on him just so that he would have a taste of his own medicine, the other side was convincing her to admit to herself the truth that she had been trying to hide from everyone since Sasuke had left.

In the end, she finally allowed herself to acknowledge the fact that she still had feelings for him, despite all the things he did to her.

She continued crying out of frustration, her heavy breathing filling the silence between them.

When she was done, Sasuke firmly put one hand on her shoulder, the other over her head, and gradually pulled her close.

She struggled weakly, throwing feeble punches against his chest.

“I’m sorry.”

“This is stupid.”



“I know.”

“I-I still love you.”

“I know.”

“You jerk!”

“Aa.”

She cast an eye on him. “Why the sudden shift to the saccharine approach?”

“None of these were my idea,” he answered dully, throwing a dark look at the corner where Naruto’s blond spikes were conspicuously visible.

Sakura smiled and buried her face against his chest. “I haven’t totally forgiven you yet—”

“Hn,” came the obvious reply. His voice was relaxed, with no hint of sarcasm, and she could already imagine his self-satisfied face above her head.

She clucked her tongue in disapproval. “—but I will... as long as you’ll never disappear without so much of a warning ever again. And stop being so mysterious! I’m not a decoder, you know.”

Sakura didn’t see his smile, but she heard it in his voice. “Hn.”

If she weren’t too preoccupied with Sasuke, she would have seen how the people around them stood in awe at the scene before them. Or how Naruto videotaped the whole exchange.

Monday, 6:09 A.M. Sometimes she wondered how she could possibly imprint every memory of him in her heart vividly. Sometimes she wished she had a remote control to replay scenes accurately. The cafeteria where they first met. The scent of earth after it rained. The midnight blue umbrella she kept hidden inside her cabinet. The knowing smiles the people in the hospital gave them. The bitter taste of coffee in her mouth.

“What?”

“What?”

“What? How? When? Where? Why?”

“Tch.”

“What are we?”

“I don’t know.”

Love.



Love is...

Zeus said: 'I have a notion which will humble [men's] pride and mend their manners; they shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two[...]'
He spoke and cut them in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling,
[...] And he bade Apollo give the face and the half of the neck a turn
in order that the man might contemplate the section of himself:
this would teach him a lesson of humility."

--Symposium

8. *whoever loved that loved not at first sight?*

Love is, she had said to him one day, and he had paused to listen: *love is, I think, like gravity. Or something. Intangible, inexplicable—but it influences every moment of our lives. What do you think?*

He thought she was stupid. But he thought that often, and there was something beautifully expressive, dreamy and happy, in her eyes. So he said: *Aa*, not knowing why.

Galileo, she smiled vaguely, eyes unfocused. *We're learning about him in history class, now—you're missing out, Sasuke-kun; I think you should come to class.* (Unsaid: stop hanging out with those druggie friends of yours. Stop wasting your potential. Stop; stop; —but forever unsaid. Theirs was a history of silence.) *Because, I mean—Galileo was more than a scientist, you know? He was—he was an iconoclast, a revolutionary, and—I want—*

What? To be like him: persecuted and ridiculed and excommunicated? he said; but the faint curl of his upper lip was not quite a sneer, the faint edge in his voice not quite derision. There was a peculiar look on his face, a boyishness at odds with the angular maturity of his face. She brought that out in him, some days.

No, Sakura squinted, wrinkling her nose at him. *No, of course not. Famous and brilliant, silly—who wants to be ridiculed?* She readjusted her grip on the swing, bending her knees and kicking off. Sasuke looked at her a long moment, thoughtful and quiet, and then too began swinging.





Genius, she said, soft and slow; eyes shadowed and voice hushed with a secret potential like the moments before dawn. He found himself straining to hear her over the metallic *crick-creek* of the swings. *I want to be brilliant.*

Aa, he said again, because there had been something hard in the set of her face, something cold and determined. *Aa*, he said, and looked at her a very long time.

Brilliant, she promised herself, a whisper, a breath, and then was silent.
(he heard.)

11. my heart is harden'd, i cannot repent

Love is, she had said to him one day, and he had listened with half an ear: *love is, I think, like magic. Hard to define, but it brings miracles. It transcends reality, mortality—it cannot be constrained by 'possible' and 'impossible.' Love is magic. Don't you think so?*

He thought she was corny and girly and—*sentimental*. But she was also smiling at him, white teeth and crinkled eyes; so he sighed and told her, *You've been reading too many romance novels, I think.*

No, she giggled. But something was off, left him unsettled, cold. *No, I've been watching too many Disney movies.*

He eyed her—a good, long look, eyes dark and perpicacious. *Aa*, he said, slow, bland. It was quicker to agree.

You cannot deny love, she told him and he said: *Maybe.*

Love conquers all, she pronounced.



And he looked up and really listened.

No, he said, quiet and distant like someone else's tragedy. *No*.

No?

All conquers love, he said, and then would not speak again.

I will love one day, she said, in his silence, because that was how things worked. *I will love, and it will not be conquered, it will never be conquered. Because love is magic, pixie dust, and all you have to do is believe. All you have to do is believe. I'll prove it to you.*

He wanted to tell her no, wanted to tell her that people could not fly even with pixie dust, even with faith and belief and pretty animation of movies. He wanted her to pause, wanted her to stop—*don't prove it*, he wanted to say, *don't prove it. You can't fly. There's gravity. Gravity.*

(gravity. but that was love too.)

But he did not say anything: remained silent and did not believe.

Doubting Thomas, she dimpled at him. Then, determinedly: *I'll show you one day. True love conquers all. I'll show you—I will. I'll love and I'll love and I'll never stop.*

He closed his eyes, remembered her smile, the bright white glint of her teeth and the merry curve of her mouth and the affection in her eyes. *Don't*, he thought:

(*don't.*)

15. *love me little, love me long*

Love is, she had said to him one day, and he had 'mhmmm'-ed in response: *love is like glue. It's what holds humanity together. It's what inspires us to achieve, to push, to accomplish—to better this world, you see. Love is what makes the world go round, what fuels us, drives us—it is the Energizer bunny. On steroids.*

Hn, he said, noncommittal as ever, but his brows furrowed a little. Her figurative language, he thought, was rapidly going downhill.

Well, c'mon. What do you think?

That your metaphors are terrible.

Similes, she sniffed at him, chewing absently at the eraser on top of her pencil. He slanted a quizzical eyebrow at her over the top of his textbook. *I mean it, you know. Love keeps us going: through pain, through hunger, through cold. Love—*



Conquers all, he said, because it had always been quicker to agree. *I know.*

You're wrong, he thought; but that was unnecessary to say and he was not in the habit of volunteering information. He also found points of inflection on his polynomial curves more interesting than her philosophies and theories and poetics.

I'm going to be like that, she told him, nodding. *Conquer something. A hero. Dragonslayer. I'm going to do something.*

All right, he said, already thinking about discriminants and derivatives. *All right.*

(he wondered later, gazing over the top of her head—wondered who exactly the dragon was. and why it needed slaying.)

17. *and hold that there is no sin but ignorance*

Love is, she had said to him one day, while he had been looking at the acorns on the oak tree in his backyard: *love is the distance from my heart to yours.*

He thought about that for a moment. *Aa*, he said, because that was expected, and did not ask *why mine?* or *what distance?* He did not understand. But, he thought, if it was that important, then she would tell him, and if it was not, then he did not care.

It struck him odd that she was silent, so he looked down at her, frowning gently. She was gazing at him, earnest and intent, and he wondered what she meant to say.

From here, she murmured, touching her chest, breastbone—and then extending her arm, touching his chest, breastbone: *to here.*

He was still frowning, quiet perplexation in the furrow of his brows, when he said, *All right.*

(all right: but he had not understood.)

Something about her mouth tightened, grew hard. She looked at him a very long time, waiting. But he had never been voluntative and he was not accustomed to this, her waiting for him to speak, her looking at him in the eyes, searching. He did not know what she was looking for, but—watching her turn away—he thought: she had not found it.

But if it was important, she would tell him, and if it was not—if it was not, he would not ask.

(*fireflies are little things, sasuke-chan*, his mother had once said. *they're so little, but look how brightly they shine. you see? little things, sasuke, remember.*)

He stood there a long time that afternoon, looking at the acorns on an oak tree. The afternoon sunlight filtered through the tree leaves in dappling shadows. He thought about a girl who had walked away and who had tried to say something, significant or



insignificant, he did not know because he had not asked. He stood in the shade of that oak tree, gazing up at the acorn glinting in the bright light, thought about the little things and remembered his (dead) mother.

Sakura? he asked into her absence, and it was a beginning.

19. *confess and be hanged*

Love is, she had written on the notebook paper, torn from one of her Latin exercise books: *love is what keeps faith, what makes me stay. Love is nothing, and love is enough.*

She had very standard penmanship, each letter well formed and slim, words evenly spaced. He thought she had likely spent long hours practicing her handwriting as a child.

His own handwriting was smaller, precise and angular engineer script. He wrote to her, a first love letter, wrote to her, a modern-day sonnet, wrote to her, everything and nothing (*for what was the use of words?*) wrote to her: *Aa*.

Blue ink that seeped through the paper. He turned the page over and read her notes on ablative nouns and supine forms, grammatical moods and perfect passive participles; and he thought about dead languages, about *Principia Mathematica*, about old mathematics and gravity and—

It was snowing outside when he called after her, when he followed her out the school, down the front steps: *Sakura!*

What was the importance of this word, this *Aa* of his that meant nothing at all? What was the importance of her receiving this scrap piece of paper, useless notes of a dead language torn out of a notebook? What was the importance of him and her, standing under the grey sky, downy flakes of snow settling in beady glimmers on her light hair? What was the importance, and what of the little things, and him and her, what of it all?

The crinkle of paper was strange, stark in the silence of gently drifting snow. But there was nothing strange when she looked up at him, eyes green and large, when she said: *Oh*.

It was not what he had expected, and he wondered when he had begun expecting. It was not what he had expected, but it was not disappointment either—enough, enough, it was sufficient. When he walked away, she was smiling.

He wondered about this, what to make of it; but it probably did not matter, he figured. He had written *Aa* and she had said *Oh* and what had that meant, what was the importance of what it meant, must it have meant anything? There was no need for him to understand—it was truth, it did not matter, his *Aa* and her *Oh*—there was no end of things in the heart, there was no way of understanding.



(you can only be.)

21. *yet let me kiss my lord before i die*

Love is, she had said to him, some lonely nights at the bus stop; he had stood beside her in the yellow glow of the street lights, handed her his umbrella on rainy days: *love is madness. Love can never be reasoned, never rationalized—love is what launched a thousand ships, ten years of war. Love is why betrayal hurts; love is why hearts break. Love is tiny deaths that we willingly subject ourselves to. Is that not madness?*

It was pride. And greed, he said instead, for he spoke these days: *greed that launched a thousand ships. How can a woman's face command that kind of loyalty? It was the prospect of conquest, the lure of Troy's riches—*

You ruin mythos, she complained, wryly. *Will you never let go of logic?*

Would he? He looked at her, considered. He knew the beauty of mathematics; he knew the elegant intricacies of a proof, the cold clean lines of logic. He knew the timelessness of ancient theorems, the immortality of truths forever. *Her* beauty was a faint thing and subtle—quiet in the corners of her mouth and soft in the arch of her brow. It was not a mathematical prettiness; never cold, never precise. Hers was *mono no aware*, the transience of being, the "*pathos of things*," sakura petals against a grey sky. He could not understand her; not as he understood his numbers and theorems and proofs. And he told her:

No.

And these lonely nights at the bus stop, she laughed—shadowed echoes of merriness.

(is madness, she dares not ask, is madness not a very lonely thing?)

25. *come give me my soul again*

Love is, she said to him over stacks of biochemistry textbooks, *love is a chemical imbalance in the brain. Love is neurons going into overload—*

Hn, he said, looking at her in rather badly hidden concern. Medical school, third year, and she was going insane, he thought.

Depression, too, she blinked owlshly at him in the dimness of the library. *Like love, a chemical imbalance. With infatuation, specifically, the dopamine levels of the brain in the mesolimbic pathway lowers inhibition. Interestingly, dopamine is also*



hypothesized to be related to schizophrenia. And it causes fruit browning, which, if you think about it—

I think, he said, haltingly, *that you are in the library on your twenty-fifth birthday*. He stopped there, not sure what to say after that.

I'm fine, she told him, lightly. *I've been busy, that's all—*

He did not know why he felt so angry at that moment. He recognized his hypocrisy, lecturing her for staying in the library on her birthday; he stayed in the library on birthdays and weekends and holidays. But he thought: *it went wrong, it went wrong somewhere, where did it go wrong?*

Talk to someone, Sakura, he said, voice low and serious, and this was the best he could offer, the only concern he knew how to show; but he meant it, he meant it.

When she looked up at him, her eyes were hard and stubborn, like the set of her chin. She bit out, *I'm fine*, with an annoyance she had never shown him before.

You're not, he said; and perhaps he had never been her friend, he had never been tactful, he had never been kind, he had never really listened—perhaps he had always been her only friend, he had always been truthful, he had always heard, perhaps, perhaps. He said only: *Get over it. It's unbecoming*, and left her there, amid stacks of biochemistry and anatomy books, in that dim corner of the library. He did not look back.

There was a coffee shop on the corner a block away from the library. He thought: *why not?*

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged from the library front doors, pale, wet-eyed. He was sitting on the front steps of the library, reading something German. *Faust*, she saw, and was not surprised. He dogeared a page, then looked up—his eyes dark and deep, like woods on snowy evenings, like roads less traveled by, like dusty memories of her English major. She did not know how to take that. But he lifted his hand, and he was offering her a Styrofoam cup of—

Hot chocolate, he said. He did not ask if she would like to talk, and he did not offer to listen; but he closed his book and set it on the step next to him. Impassivity in the way he leaned his elbows on his knees—but patience too.

She said: *I'm not happy*.

Aa, he replied. She could not tell what he meant by that. He did not know either, but this was not about him. Not today.

*I'm twenty-five years old today. I'm learning under probably the best neurosurgeons in the world. I'm smart and I'm going places and—*She waved her hands, laughed a helpless, despairing little laugh. *What's it all mean? What's it all matter? What—what am I doing, what is the importance of—of all this?*

I don't know, he told her plainly.



It's not enough, it's not—, she told him, trying very hard not to cry. Neurons and chemical imbalances and phenethylamines. It's not enough and what do I care about neurotransmitters and I-I'm twenty-five years old today, how am I supposed to believe in pixie dust?

Hn, he said, drawing a finger across the rim of his cup.

What do I do? D-Do I buy a birthday cake and just go on? She asked thickly, half-smiling, half-laughing, blinking because she would not, could not cry. *What am I doing? What am I doing wrong? How do I believe?*

(i want to believe.)

It was ridiculous, all of this, and who was he, trying to comfort, trying to care? He was not made for this, and did not know how to do this, and the little things, his mother had told him—what had that meant?

He did not understand a lot of things, because he never asked. But, he thought, watching this girl trying to hold back her tears and disillusionment—the little things were not amino acids and phenethylamines and biochemistry.

What can you do? he wondered distantly. *What do you care? Who is she to you,* he thought, and *What does she matter?* and then, he kissed her.

It's not gravity, he told her, because it was his turn to speak now. *Not glue, and not madness. It's not something to name, it's not something to define. So stop trying. It's not magic, Sakura, it can't conquer all; and it, it doesn't have to—do you understand?*

No, she said, and he told her, *That's right.*

All right, she said, and then: *Kiss me again?*

So he did, and maybe he knew what he was doing and maybe he did not. Maybe it was a beginning or maybe he was already halfway in before he realized. And maybe, maybe—perhaps, perhaps—

He did not know how to speak in poetics, had never been good at words. His emotions were not mathematical. But he held her hand on the way home, and he traced on the inside of her palm ∞, loop after loop.

(love, he had not said to her, but she understood nevertheless, love is that which does not pass.)

*"and the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole,
and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love."*



Nadir

2008, summer

The small mirror distorted her features, such that certain aspects of her face became even more prominent than usual. Her forehead, namely, and an annoying little pimple that chose to emerge that fateful day. Other than that, it was a serviceable tool to assure her she still looked remotely human and that the shadows ringing her eyes didn't make her look particularly cadaverous. Her paper-pale skin and the weight loss from her irregular sleeping and eating habits did enough of that.

Sakura redid the messy bun that had been falling over her eyes for the last couple of hours, and slammed her locker shut. She licked her lips, almost as an afterthought, then muttered an oath under her breath. She left her lip gloss in the compartment of old reliable Mithrandir, the white second-hand Beetle that still had enough spunk to carry its ostentatious name. She didn't have time to make a run for the dormitories, where it was safely parked, gathering a golden sheen of pollen under the trees.

She slung on her backpack and dashed out, sneakers squeaking as she dodged past a bunch of colleagues—"Have a good night, you guys!"—overtook a rickety stretcher being coaxed along by an even more rickety orderly—"Bye, Mr. Sato!"—and careened into Ward 5's nurses' station to endorse her pet to roommate and surgical resident, Tenten.

"You're seeing Mr. Stoic and Brooding, again," Tenten accused, looking up from the computer screen.

"Look who's talking," Sakura retorted, breathless. "Aren't you married to one? Anyway, Pretty-sensei likes taking walks in the evenings, like just right after sunset."

"It's a cat, Sakura."

"And *he* likes his exercise. Please? I love you, Tenten-chan."

"Oh, fine. But you have to talk about this guy of yours with me first. No buts and ifs."

"And make Ino-chan boiling mad? Fair deal. I'm sure I'll be the topic of interest in tonight's bonding time, anyway."

"Not if Hinata's there. She'll guilt trip us into a movie marathon or a review session instead of gossiping about your man issues."

"You girls enjoy, then."

"You enjoy."

Sakura tried her best to smile. "We'll see."





“You haven’t talked to the guy for five years, right? Cheer up?”

“Ah, don’t mind me,” Sakura murmured, looking away. “Heebie-jeebies.”

“Dr. Haruno, excuse me,” interrupted one of the nurses timidly. “About this patient. . .”



“Sorry, Keiko-san,” Sakura said. “I’m off for the day. I’m sure Dr. Hyuuga here would be more than willing and able.”

“I know about that case, but it’s really not my call,” Tenten said, glancing at the chart the nurse carried. “Can you page the medical resident, please?”

“Eh? But that’s me!”

“No, it’s Ino now, and I’m pretty sure she’ll strap you down and sedate you just to stop you from leaving, so you better make a move on.”

“Yes, I better—I’m late!”

2008, summer

The sun still hovered high above the vibrant, fast-paced city; it was a mid-afternoon in a mid-summer day, and the lord of the skies flaunted its prowess. It was still a mild day, as far as summer days go, and downtown the streets were bustling, not only with the usual white-collar workers rushing about, but also with tourists leisurely exploring the promenade and teenagers congregating in corners as they were wont to, given precious free time.

The inner city hospital sprawled several blocks, boarded by picturesque planters dotted with puny colorful flowers and by judiciously-spaced plots with slender, wide-branching trees. It blended in with the dirty gray of the commercial buildings that towered nearby, but it was an oddly welcoming sight, once its clean white walls became visible. The driver of a black pick-up truck lucked out and was able to park at a side street near the entrance of the main building. Sasuke had driven a long way to get there, not only in terms of kilometers. It had taken him years.

He waited in the car, window rolled down, brooding. There wasn’t anything in particular weighing down his mind, but the bustle of wheelchairs carting discharged patients to their waiting vehicles summoned memories he’d rather not recall. He could smell again the aseptic finish that hid the stench of aged blood and human waste, could taste at the back of his mouth the metallic tinge that came with the infusion of hydromorphone into his veins, the suffocating lightness that blanketed his head. It was in another hospital, another city, another world. His convalescence wasn’t as easy as going home, being looked after by family members for the first few days, following up with his doctors. There were acres of him that needed to be untangled, undone.

Now. . .

His thoughts didn’t wander too far from safety before a familiar sight caught his attention. The rose-colored head bobbing among the chattering posse of an emaciated old man opened a chasm in his mind. Memories stirred, floated to surface; these were from a decade ago, lazy school afternoons, of a bright-eyed, over-achieving girl rushing to her



club activities, of a blank-eyed, mediocre boy watching coolly from the rooftop, king of the world, oblivious.

“Hi,” came the greeting. He thought it unsure, at first, but decided she was merely breathless from her run. Her smile was warm and confident, not like the ones he could remember, hesitant and seeking approval.

Who are you, he wanted to ask, but didn’t, and instead gestured to the empty space beside him.

“Sorry, I’m late,” she said briskly. She scrambled up the passenger seat, not particularly graceful.

“You’re not late,” he pointed out.

Sakura glanced at her wristwatch. “Only two minutes. I guess, that’s not terrible.” She looked at him and beamed another smile. “You look well, Sasuke-kun. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” he said politely, as he pulled out of the side street. “You?”

“I’m well.” She paused. He could see her stare at his profile from the corner of an eye. Her expression was contemplative. “Actually, I’m better than that,” she amended with a chuckle. “I’m perfect.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Amazing, isn’t it?”

“Where to now, then?”

“Konoha. Is that a problem?”

“No. Is it?”

“Of course not.”

1998, late winter

Konoha was a mid-size town amidst gigantic evergreen trees. It originally sprouted from a lucrative lumber business that flourished about a hundred or so years ago. Now, the millennia-old trees were closely monitored by the government, and while logging remained a major industry, people have become more ecologically aware and allowed themselves to be guided by the parameters set by law. As with anything involving societal changes, it didn’t come about without controversy.

It was Haruno Sakura’s last night in that town, but she didn’t feel particularly excited or anxious about leaving home, unlike most college-bound teenagers her age.



Tomorrow, she would be bound for the capital of Fire Country, being one of the fortunate few admitted into the National University, even ranking high in the entrance examination. As a scholar, she was able to avail a subsidized room in the school dormitory. It was probably a tiny pocket of space, so she couldn't afford to bring more than a brown box that used to hold instant ramen, courtesy of the local grocer, and her roomy, doggy old school bag. She only packed essentials: required documents, hygiene products, enough clothes to last a week without laundering, money she had prudently saved throughout the years.

The room she had grown up in was microscopic, anyway, only big enough to fit a twin-size four-poster, a narrow study table with its varnish peeling off, and an antique dresser. Her old text books and notes were all stacked neatly under the bed, from middle to high school, available should she need them again. She planned to visit home often, at least once a month, so she didn't need to bring everything tomorrow. She didn't need to transplant her entire life overnight.

There was a respectful knock on her door; her family valued private spaces, small as they were.

"Sakura-chan," her mother said, as if treading carefully. "Are you sure you want to leave tomorrow? I mean, your father can always exchange your ticket for a later date."

"It's okay, mom," Sakura said. "Daddy'll have to pay a surcharge if he does that. There's no reason I can't leave tomorrow."

"We'll understand, you know," her mother insisted. "He is your boyfriend."

"Oh, he isn't."

Her mom looked puzzled. "The Uchiha boy? Mikoto's youngest baby?"

"I only went to prom with him. I'm not even sure why he asked me." Sakura paused. She seemed a tad pensive than usual, but other than that, her face remained unperturbed. "I think it must have been thanks for my help with those trigonometry questions when we were second years."

"But wasn't it him who beat you out of rank number one?"

"He disliked trig, I think. Something about the cyclic, repetitive nature of trigonometric functions pissing him off. I've forgotten. That was last year. I haven't really spoken to him much until he asked me to go to the prom with him a month ago."

"Well, you should get some sleep. You don't want to miss your train tomorrow."

That was a recent development. Originally, she was going to travel by bus, a cheaper alternative that took about seven hours. Yesterday, she begged her parents to let her go by train instead. There was a huge pile up in the freeway two days ago, and she didn't feel like going through that same path. The person reportedly responsible for the crash had been airlifted to Metro-Sound General Hospital in the nearest city. The last they heard, he was still fighting for his life.



2008, summer

“... *As we're both lying here, there's so many things I want to say. I would always—*”

Sakura stopped abruptly and listened with a slight frown. She had been singing with the radio, facing the window, so it wouldn't be obvious, in case her companion glanced off the road and at her, hoping the music was loud enough to drown out her wavering, impotent voice. There was a lower register that was dueting with her, and it didn't sound anything like Peter Cetera.

“Are you singing?” she asked incredulously, unable to catch herself beforehand.

Sasuke continued to drive, to stare at the winding expanse of asphalt before him.

“N—Not that there's anything, *anything*, wrong with singing. I mean. I mean, it's *you*. . . singing. But people sing all the time and, and my outburst was totally unwarranted and—”

“... ”

Sakura stopped her mouth, biting down on her lower lip to keep from speaking on. She remained quiet for a time, unsure whether she had caused offense—it was an easy thing to do to her prickly companion. Sasuke resumed his indistinct humming half that time.

“I'm sorry,” Sakura was finally able to stammer. “If I unwittingly embarrassed you for pointing that out. I mean, if I sing loudly then you won't be able to hear yourself, anymore. So you can keep on singing and pretend I don't know you're singing . . . But that would be ridiculous, wouldn't it?”

“I don't have any problems hearing myself sing,” came the blase response.

Rather stunned, Sakura took a moment before she quipped her approval. “Neither do I!” she announced cheerfully, before hurling herself back into song. “*I am a man who will fight for your honor—*”

“I've always thought you the shower diva type.”

“*And I'll be the hero—hey!*”

He finished the line she indignantly left hanging, picking up the song easily. His singing voice was deeper and smoother than his speaking one, yet clearer and lighter, floating easily to steep their enclosed space.

“*We're gonna live forever, knowing together that we did it all for the glory—*”

“*—of love.*”



“You sing pretty well for a man whom people largely thought of as mute,” Sakura commented, regaining some of her spunk.

“So do you, for a woman who use to squawk Class 3-A into submission.”

“I resent that! Those squawking skills happened to land me the beach volleyball captain post in college.”

“That stoic intimidating mute thing happened to give me the student council presidency.”

“Uchiha Sasuke, former class president? Oh, perish the thought! And they say med students are intolerable when it comes to reliving their glorious undergrad days.”

“Who said anything about former?”

Sakura paused, thoughtful, finally daring to look his direction once again. “That makes sense, I guess. How long did you take a break from school?”

“Five and a half years, total.”

“Oh.”

“Third year in Ami University. Actuarial Science.”

“Actuarial Science?”

“You were expecting Ecology? Forestry?”

“I wasn’t expecting *anything*.”

There was another pregnant pause as Sakura cringed, realized she made another unintentional hit on her companion, waiting to see if he would take offense and kick her out of the truck.

“I am driving,” Sasuke reminded her a-matter-of-factly.

The young doctor laughed in spite of herself. “Is that a threat?”

“Your turn.”

“I have a mean right hook?”

“Kickboxing. Three golds in regional. Two semi-finals in the nationals, but you lost both against Rock city.”

“You keep tabs?”

He shrugged with his left shoulder. He had been driving with his right.

“. . . Katon University. Doctor of Medicine.”

“Cum laude,” supplied the pale, dark haired man.

“National University—”



“Biophysics, pre-med track. Summa cum laude.”

“Ah, no. Magna cum laude. I messed up senior year.”

She thought she heard him mutter a sorry.

“What are you apologizing for?” she said smoothly, despite the lump in her throat. “Ino and I hit every club in the City that year. Nothing to do with you, see?”

“Yamanaka Ino? 3-B?”

“Same girl. She was in an all-girls school a train ride away from mine, so we met up downtown almost every Friday night, after we bumped into each other in a *goukon* during the beginning of senior year.”

“Yamanaka, the woman who calls herself your sworn rival?”

“Shikamaru started going out with a Sand girl he met in National U,” Sakura narrated, as if it explained everything. “The three of us were housed in the same building.”

“3-D. Nara Shikamaru. Yamanaka hated him.”

“I thought so, too. Anyway, Ino and I became partners-in-crime after that. I’m not sure if that’s when she decided to go to med school. She graduated from Kuni Medical College. She’s in the same residency program as I am, but eventually she wants to go into Psychiatry.”

“And Nara?”

“Hmm. . . middle management in some international consultancy firm. He got married last year. I heard he’s getting promoted regularly, like clockwork. Ino’s still not speaking to him, but his best friend Chouji—remember him?—sneaks some news past her once in a while.”

“ . . . Aa.”

Sakura somehow felt she needed to defend her friend. “Well, it’s not like *he* ever tried speaking to her,” she groused.

Sasuke had something else in mind, however. “Yamanaka doesn’t know about this then,” he said. “She would have stopped you.”

“This? Ah, you mean my meeting you?” She obliged to a long-suffering sigh. “She didn’t when I left the hospital, but yes, I’ll be getting a week-long sermon from her when I get back. Thank you in advance for the torture.”

“I found you through her six years ago,” Sasuke continued. “Drag racing in South Metro-Sound. She was with one of the competing drivers. And then again, a week after, in an *omiai*.”

Sakura mulled this over, a small crease forming on her forehead as she did. “She never told me that,” she finally said. “Though I suppose that explains her vehement



disapproval of everything relating to you. I guess, she feels responsible about what happened back then.”

Again, the awkward silence came. It stayed longer than Sakura could bear.

“I’m hungry,” she said, unable to think of anything else that could break the impasse.

His answer was swift. “I have food in the back.”

“Great.” She sighed, relieved. “Let’s stop in that park in Usa Village. You know the place?”

“Aa.”

2002, summer-fall

Even the nights were still alien to her. She was unused to looking up and seeing a ghastly luminescence screen over the firmament, the stars rendered as washed-out stains, the moon. . . was just in its new moon phase, perhaps. She had been living in this city for over three years now, but she had rarely stayed out this late. The bright lights of the downtown and the frenetic energy of the people milling about the various establishments lining the streets painted a vivid, colorful picture, with a cacophonous but riveting soundtrack. It was rather intimidating.

A hand came down on her shoulder. She started.

“If you don’t plan on headlining the papers tomorrow, I suggest you pay attention to where you’re walking.”

She blinked as the heaviness on her left shoulder fell away to brush subtly down her back.

“A college student hit-and-run by some drunk in downtown Katon city?” she said, shivering in spite of herself. “They wouldn’t waste two lines on me.”

Obsidian orbs trained on her for a few seconds, before their owner took a long puff from his cigarette and tossed his head in a curt gesture. “Novel enough for me,” he said, his eyes remaining cold and humorless.

She looked down and saw the vague ripple of running water in the gaping hole, centimeters from her high-heeled feet. It was an unsealed manhole, brimming with this morning rain’s run off.

“Drowning in the city sewers then,” she said. “That’s more like it.”

“Give me your hand.”

“Huh?”



“So we don’t get separated.”

“Oh.”

He took her by the forearm and continued walking, guiding her around the opening. She followed him wordlessly, slightly disoriented. It wasn’t even from alcohol, though she had consumed tonight more than she ever had. It was everything, him, her, the oblivion of disco lights and the relentless brassy heartbeat of the club still echoing in her head.

Uchiha Sasuke could dance.

Sakura had finished the last of her entrance exams today (or rather, yesterday), and an old schoolmate decided to take her downtown for a few drinks. Yamanaka Ino was a hard woman to refuse and Sakura was curious about the more exciting aspects of college life—she was a senior this year, after all, had been in college for three years.

The clubs were packed, and they were supposedly lucky to share a table with a dark, unfriendly creature brooding in one corner of the samba club. They didn’t talk much, aside from the preliminary pleasantries that was required of people who had come from the same town and had gone to the same high school accidentally bumping into each other. Then, randomly irrational things started happening, like Ino-san getting into a fist fight with her classmate and childhood friend Nara Shikamaru, who was staying in the same apartment building as Sakura and just happened to be there. And Uchiha-san asking her to dance was unreal. The Uchiha Sasuke she remembered barely even socialized in school, and she had to sit out the prom because he refused to do anything but stare into space. Whether it was the strobe lights or the repetitive beats that did it, before she knew what was really happening, it was four in the morning and they were being ushered out of the club.

“Where’s Ino-san?” she had yelled over the din, the first words out of her mouth in hours.

“Thrown out with Nara.”

“When was that?”

“Midnight.”

“I’ve missed the last train!”

“I’ll get you a cab.”

“But—”

He disappeared into the crowd. She was able to catch him, but was hard-pressed to keep up with his brisk walk and the fluid way people seemed to part from his path. She could have been invisible to him—he never turned to look at her—till he stopped her from talking a plunge into that unmarked hole in that street corner.



“Call Yamanaka again,” he commanded after an interminable amount of walking.

Once again, she used his phone to call hers, which was in her purse, left behind with Ino for safe-keeping after Sakura dazedly scrambled after Sasuke to the dance floor four hours ago. There was still no answer.

“I have a make-up exam later,” Sakura said glumly.

Sasuke didn’t say anything, but once again took her by the forearm.

“Where are we going?”

“There’s a cheap motel three blocks down.”

“What?”

“You’ll need sleep.”

“ . . . I suppose.”

“We’ll split the bill.”

Because they were splitting the bill, Sakura insisted they split the bed, as well. Sasuke neither complained nor protested, had plunked down fully dressed on the queen-sized four-poster, and promptly fell asleep. Though bone-tired and inebriated, Sakura took a while longer to do the same. When she woke up the next day, her companion was gone. A polite note said he would get her half of the payment the next time they bump into each other in downtown Katon.

True enough, her phone rang the following Friday, with a call from an unfamiliar number.

“Meet me in Club Mandala.”

“Huh,” was once again her eloquent reply.

“You’re in Charcoal Street? You may bring Yamanaka with you.”

Ino didn’t seem surprised by the phone call. She needed a companion while she danced the bile out of her system and had dragged Sakura with her to go clubbing once again. Sakura, done with the graduate school entrance exams and catching up with her school work, saw no reason to decline. Besides, Ino needed a leash of sorts to keep her from possibly maiming another person that night; Sakura felt personally responsible, since she didn’t do anything last time.

Uchiha Sasuke would have been unrecognizable to their high school mates. From afar, under the dizzying shift of the multi-colored lights, he seemed urbane, cool, leaning against the bar while swirling an old-fashioned glass. His dark-hued dress shirt was sleek, emphasizing his form in the right places, leaving more tantalizing details to the imagination. His jeans was unexpectedly and un-apologetically tight. His black hair was swept back, perhaps with a generous amount of sculpting gel. When he turned to say



something to one of the women beside him, he seemed charming and personable. Sakura found it odious.

“Ino-san.” She attempted to yank her friend away. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“Why not?” the blonde demanded. “Did something happen last time?”

“Nothing happened,” was her quick response. “I just can’t think of any reasons why he would call us here. It’s suspicious.”

“Like, he’s with the Yakuza and he plans to sell our kidney to the black market and the rest of us as sex slaves?”

Sakura laughed weakly.

“His family’s pretty well off, you know. Plus, they’re all dead. It’s not that strange. The whole setup smells of pampered, rich boy needing somebody to assuage his loneliness.”

“Assuage? But he was never like that back in Konoha, was he?”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot you two went out.”

“We didn’t,” Sakura asserted for what she felt as the hundredth time. “He asked me to prom because it would be notable for the valedictorian to not have a date, and he didn’t want to deal with the annoying questions. I was sitting next to him during the graduation ceremony practices, so he thought it convenient to ask me.”

“He told you that?”

“He wouldn’t have wasted saliva to do so. It was easy to figure out.”

“He still called you.”

“I was wondering about that.” Sakura frowned. “We didn’t exchange numbers.”

“You used his phone to call yours, remember? What’s wrong with your brain today, forehead-girl?”

“I say, we just leave,” she insisted stubbornly.

“I think he likes you.”

“He barely said two words to me last week.”

“You owe him money.”

“... Damn it.”

“Just give the guy a chance. He shouldn’t be as creepy once you get to know him. Plus, he’s hotter than *ever*.”

“Are you trying to ditch me again after you dragged me to come here?”



“Why, Sakura-chan! How long have you harbored such unflattering thoughts about me?”

“Since you dunked my sneakers in that clogged toilet in the third floor girls restroom?”

“That was in eighth grade, darling. Get over it.”

Like previously, Sasuke exchanged the barest of pleasantries with them and spent the most of the time drinking silently while the girls talked or danced. He danced with them, twice each. He was polite but taciturn, bearing no trace of the suave, unctuous creature Sakura had earlier sighted from across the room.

When she tried to give him her share of the bill from last week, he refused to take it.

“But you said we’d split it.”

He nodded, noncommittal.

“I don’t want to owe you money.”

“Then hold on to it for now.”

They met again, several times in this manner, with Sasuke giving her a meeting time and place, sometimes to dance, mostly to drink. Sakura remained prudent, of course, and kept track of both their alcohol consumption. They barely finish two bottles of beer apiece in a four-hour period, so the reason for their meetings continued to baffle her. He never took back the money she was holding for him, so she stopped offering it back at some point.

Eventually, she mustered enough gall to ask him whether they could be considered going out.

“If you want to.”

The vague answer irritated her. “Are you asking me to, Uchiha-san?” she asked.

“If it would keep you from choking on that ‘Uchiha-san,’ that’s fine.”

“I don’t understand, Sasuke-*kun*,” she said testily, mocking the way Sasuke was referred to in primary school.

“I don’t care. You’re the one who feels the need to catagorize this.”

“This” eventually expanded to include long, silent walks in a park nearby both their schools, studying for hours in the city library, and coffee/tea at random times every few days. Even though the definition of their relationship continued to elude her, Sakura eventually did find out more information about her reticent, old school mate.

Sasuke was studying engineering at the prestigious private university of Colubra. He was delayed some years due to a car accident, as his injuries required months of physical therapy and rehabilitation. He was minimally involved in his family’s



business, Antigone Logging, and was only consulted for major decisions as a formality. He subsisted through a trust fund his older brother had set up a few months before he died from the same vehicular collision. Sasuke sustained chronic back pain from that accident, which made it difficult for him to concentrate on studying, most days. He usually stared at passing people, while Sakura talked through her copious lecture notes and book annotations.

It took Sakura close to two months to collate that much information about him. It was mostly her who spoke when they were together. She talked about herself, her experiences, even her aspirations when she thought him particularly distant and less likely to respond. She talked about news from Konoha and the people they had gone to school with. He didn't seem to mind, and the amount of words he returned, sparse as they were, were more than he ever deigned to waste on her all those years they were schoolmates back in Konoha.

Now, about dancing. . .

Dancing was strange. Neither of them were particularly good at it, and most of the dancing they did constituted of vague rhythmic movements made in time with the music. She was more liable to get drunk in the energy, the heat of a packed dance floor, than the drink she would buy herself. Her cheeks flushed, her breathing and heartbeat racing with each other, she laughed often, knowing she was neither graceful nor enchanting, but wallowing in the happiness that she didn't care. He may have felt the same, as she had sighted the rare smiles that actually reached his eyes while in that tangle of people. He even held her by her hand sometimes, though he kept a respectful distance between them, even in the one or two slow dance they didn't manage to escape. Sakura lost track of time during these dances, but he made sure she never missed her ride home. He always roused her from her pleasing delirium, just in time to catch the last train.

It was two in the morning when they stepped out of Club Mandala, some months after their first arranged meeting there.

"I missed the train," Sakura said, not particularly upset about it. "What do you want to do till dawn? Walk around?"

"I have a 2DK condo unit two blocks down," Sasuke said.

"Since when?"

"My parents used to stay in it when they had business here in Katon."

If Sakura remembered the town gossip correctly, his parents had been dead for at least fifteen years.

"Why did we go to that motel then?" she asked curiously. She didn't press when he didn't answer.

The streets weren't as crowded as it was that first night, so they walked in their usual manner. Sasuke had a hand stuffed in a pocket, while Sakura trailed behind a few



steps, mostly avoiding the smoke slithering from the lighted cigarette he had in his other hand.

He led her to a sky-rise among buildings with opulent facades, the type she'd dared not enter by herself, the type that had more elevators than necessary and straight-faced, uniformed guards that sat behind luxurious marble desks. Sasuke plugged a code into the panel and the sliding doors opened to take them in. The guard bowed familiarly to Sasuke, so he must have been there often enough to be easily remembered.

The unit he led her to was plain and simply decorated; she would have called it spartan, but there was a hint of feminine taste in the slim, modern furnishings and the watercolor paintings that adorned the walls. Sasuke led her directly to what must have been his room and proceeded to undress her. His advance was without preamble and so startled her, but he hushed her protest with a finger to her lips, damp still from when he washed his hands after using the toilet, and she stumbled after him when he beckoned from his bed, not dazed but hyperalert. Their naked bodies were silver fish in a black ocean of satin, their movements illuminated by the trickle of city lights, the shift of shadows telltale.

She awoke, hours later, drowning in the heavy down comforter. The world outside bore traces of the coming dawn, and the details of the room was now visible enough, the darkness tinged with gray. It was as minimally furnished as the rest of what she saw of the apartment. Her clothes were draped over a wooden chair, while his were nowhere in sight. She wrapped herself with a sheet from the tangle in his bed, and padded about the room softly, calling his name in a timid whisper, just in case.

She found him slouched on his leather couch outside, his shirt on the floor, his jeans unbuttoned and riding low to emphasize the easy path down his groin, as if stopped in the process of being pulled up. She stopped some distance away and merely watched. If he was awake, he would speak to her; if he wasn't she would leave him alone undisturbed.

Moments later, it came to her why his naked chest seemed so much like a stone bust in some museum: he wasn't breathing.

She shook him, hard; he didn't wake. She felt for his pulse; it was thready and weak, not like the furious gallop she felt while underneath him earlier that morning. Was it fortuitous that she knew he always kept his cellphone on his left hip pocket? Or that she has received CPR training only a week ago and could therefore still remember word for word the algorithm that could save his life?

"Uchiha Sasuke, July 23, 1980," she answered the paramedics' inquiries. "He had a car accident four years ago. His back still hurts a lot from it. I don't know anything else."

She followed him to the hospital on foot, because she didn't have a car and the train was starting to get busy with the daily commuters. She stayed in the hospital as he was resuscitated and given antidotes, as he was brought to a room for observation,



because there was no one else she knew to call about him—but he couldn't have absolutely no one, could he? She had to go home to the dormitory briefly, however, because she had a life that couldn't be just put on hold at a moment's notice, and there were things to manage and settle, and she hadn't slept for forty-eight hours. When she came back the next day, he had already been discharged.

They had been meeting over a span of about eleven weeks. It took her six months to stop looking. It took her years to stop wondering. At some point, she placed the fifteen-thousand yen in an envelope and left it at the front desk of the condominium.

2008, summer

"That should be a nice spot."

". . ."

"See that tree? It has wide-spanning branches and its leaves are translucent. It'll be pretty under it, and it won't be too hot."

"Aa."

"How's this spot?"

"Knobby."

"Knobby? How about there, then?"

"Damp."

"You are such a prima donna!"

"Hand me the basket."

"What's in the. . . Oh! That's nice. Somehow you just don't seem to be the white-and-corn-blue checkered type. Who lost that blanket?"

"Kakashi."

"Kakashi? Hakate Kakashi-sensei, Konoha High's principal?"

"Same jackass."

"He made the food, too? How impressive."

"I did."

". . . I suppose that makes sense, since you practically lived alone for years in that big house. This basket is really pretty, by the way."

"It was forced on me by said jackass."

"Oooh, wine. What's this, chablis?"



"Straight from a dead person's reserve."

"Your dad?"

"My brother. Otousan was a sake fan."

"Sake, huh? Oh! The blue of your plastic cups matches that of the blanket. How cute! Let me guess: Kakashi-sensei again?"

"Hn."

"Should I pour for you? Ah, but you're driving—"

"One cup of wine wouldn't incapacitate me. We can stay here for as long as you want, till you're satisfied I'm sober."

"Fair enough. Ah, that's enough wine for me. That way I can relieve you when you get tired. It's about four more hours to Konoha town, ne?"

"Aa."

". . ."

". . ."

"Now that we have a smidgeon of alcohol in our systems, how have you been, Sasuke?"

"I already answered that question."

"Well, yes, but a little more detail wouldn't hurt."

"Same with you. You're doing your residency?"

"Yes. I have one more year before I finish."

"Then? You'll stay in Katon city?"

"Hm. . . I don't know. I've always dreamed of going back to Konoha town and opening a clinic, taking care of the locals, watching over everyone as they grow up and age. Now, I'm thinking I should stay in Umiushi Medical Center—hmm, the *teka-maki*'s excellent! My tongue's on fire. Ahh!"

"It's water."

"Oh. . . Oh. Of course, if I had gulped down the wine, a fine conversation we'd be having now. Ah, that's good! Anyway, I think I should stay in Umiushi Medical Center and gain some more experience, maybe go for fellowship and further specialization. I don't know yet."

"Fellowship?"

"Uh-huh. I'm thinking Geriatrics. I became a doctor because of my grandfather, you know, years and years ago."



“Aa.”

“He died three years ago in his sleep.”

“I see.”

“You know, the *kushi dango* isn’t bad at all. I’d like it sweeter though. Anyway, I think Endocrinology is pretty engaging, too. The little I saw of it during rotation was pretty challenging. Who knows? Umiushi Medical Center wasn’t my first choice, actually. I wanted to go to a community hospital, like Konoha Hospital. But it’s fine since Ino-chan is there.”

“You were saying Yamanaka never forgave Nara?”

“Well, Ino-chan hasn’t spoken to Shikamaru for years. But she told me once. . . I guess, it’s okay to tell you. She told me that after she found out from Chouji that Shikamaru really loved his wife, she wasn’t as angry anymore. Something about knowing she lost fair and square against just another woman, an equal.”

“So Nara did marry the princess of the Kuni Financial Group.”

“Yeah, I guess, Ino-chan was prepared to think the worst of Shikamaru, even marrying as a tactical business move. Oh, well.”

“Yamanaka doesn’t forgive easily.”

“Not really, I suppose. Ahaha! Not with men, at least.”

“I’ve never done anything to her.”

“Well, she can get very protective of friends. For example, one of our colleagues, Hinata-chan, is the cousin of a famous plastic surgeon in Fugu Trauma Center. The Hyuuga is this affluent family of doctors based in Fugu City, so Neji-san can really get on Hinata-chan’s case because she’s supposed to be not performing as well as they want her to. I kid you not, Ino almost came to blows with him one time when we were interns. Good thing, Neji-san’s wife is one tough lady—and was one of our seniors. She literally kicked her husband out of our apartment (the four of us are sharing a unit). It was both scary and entertaining to watch, actually. Ino-chan and Tenten-chan together can get pretty scary, period.”

“Yamanaka hates me.”

“Hate’s a very strong word, but I’m afraid it’s applicable this instant.”

“Then I hurt you more than you let on.”

“. . . I suppose so.”

“. . .”

“So when are we going to talk about you?”

“. . .”



“I gave a fair of amount of details there. Shouldn’t it be your turn?”

“ . . . Aa.”

“How did you end up being in close terms with Kakashi-sensei? I vaguely remember you having pretty much nothing but contempt for our teachers in Konoha High.”

“I lived in his place for a time, when I didn’t have a place to live in.”

“O-oh. Sort of like Naruto living with Iruka-sensei in middle and high school. You remember Naruto, right?”

“Kakashi and Iruka share a government subsidized housing for educators.”

“You mean, you lived with all three of them. But. . . Naruto hated you.”

“Hates me. An affectation.”

“You mean, he actually looks upon you as a brother, don’t you?”

“It’s not funny.”

“No? It’s pretty cute, actually. Four bachelors in a house. It must have been stinky!”

“It was a temporary arrangement.”

“Aww. . . you don’t have to minimize their importance to you. So when did you resume school?”

“Three years ago.”

“What did you do during that long break?”

“Took odd jobs. Most of them were legitimate.”

“O-Oh.”

“Contrary to popular belief, I’ve never been involved with the Yakuza.”

“Ahahaha! Really now?”

“I’ve never intentionally killed anybody.”

“ . . . Is that so? W-What happened to your trust fund?”

“I could hardly use that to buy back majority of the shares of Antigone Loggings from a distant family branch.”

“So the rumors all those years ago about an Uchiha clan feud was true?”

“Partially.”



“Hmm. . . So it took you also about three years to regain control of your family’s business. That’s sounds pretty impressive. Of course, I don’t know much about business. Speaking of which, you did stop school six years ago, right? That time?”

“That time I overdosed on heroin? I stopped going to school some time before that.”

“Heroin, was it? In retrospect, it makes perfect sense. You were already on narcotic pills for your back pain. We drank more than usual that night. And you cap it off with heroin. It was luck I found you unconscious and not yet dead. How long were you on it?”

“The first and only time I used it.”

“. . . Wow. Was I that horrible in bed?”

“. . .”

“I mean— If, if you hated it so much that you needed to get high afterwards. . .”

“Sakura.”

“I know, I know. Lamé attempt at joking. You have chronic back pain. I’m guessing the pills weren’t working, anymore.”

“Nothing’s wrong with my back.”

“Nothing. . .?”

“It wasn’t my back.”

“Not your back, huh? What was wrong then?”

“A number of things. I was in pain.”

“You were in pain, but of course, it wasn’t your back. How stupid of me. You wouldn’t have been able to do it for hours on end, would you?”

“. . .”

“Why did you bring me to your parents’ condo unit that night?”

“To exorcize the pain. It didn’t work. Neither did heroin. Isn’t it supposed to be a very potent drug?”

“Yes. Yes it is. So I wasn’t any help to you at all. Those months you kept seeing me?”

“You were worse than the pills. Your presence was a sickeningly intoxicating, but it was never enough. One day, the sound of your babbling voice was enough to ease the pain, the next it wasn’t.”

“You developed a tolerance for me?”



“When you weren’t around, the whiplash was unbelievably potent. It came to the point where even you weren’t enough.”

“ . . . Why me?”

“Don’t know.”

“Since when?”

“A long time. Even before the accident. Who knows? I told you I met Yamanaka at a matchmaking meeting that year.”

“We were twenty-two then. You were looking for a wife that early?”

“Conditions that came with my inheritance. That’s how I got hooked on you.”

“Ino-chan set us up that night in Club Mandala?”

“Aa.”

“So that’s why she feels so responsible about you.”

“ . . . ”

“You weren’t the only one hooked, you know.”

“ . . . Aa. I fully intended to sleep with you that night, when I brought you to that hotel.”

“Eh? But you didn’t even come on to—”

“I couldn’t get it up.”

“ . . . Geeze, you don’t have to be *that* honest.”

“Isn’t that part of your conditions for agreeing to meet me like this?”

“Well, yes, but I hardly expected you to be so forthcoming. Ugh! My cheeks are going to be permanently dyed red.”

“ . . . ”

“So how’d you stop? With the pills, I mean.”

“Cold turkey.”

“Then you did the same with me. So that’s why you disappeared.”

“I didn’t. You just couldn’t find me.”

“That was. . . That was callous of you. It was a perfectly asinine thing to do. Do you realize that?”

“Aa.”

“You should know, I walked the entirety of Charcoal Street every weekend for that entire winter. And it was a horrible La Niña year, too.”



“Aa.”

“H-How’s your pain now?”

“Better. I visited my parents’ and my brother’s grave twice already.”

“T-that’s nice.”

“... You can cry, if you want to.”

“I don’t need your permission to do so. And you most certainly don’t need mine.”

“...”

“...”

“...”

“... Ah, we shouldn’t—”

“But you don’t dislike it.”

“Of course, I don’t dislike it. Haven’t we established that already?”

“Then... shut up.”

“...”

“...”

“...A-Anything below the jaw-line is considered hanky-panky. And don’t leave marks.”

“Remind me with your fist, if I cross the line.”

“R-Right. I’ll give you that right hook I gave you last month for s-seducing me.”

“The one you wanted to give me but didn’t?”

“Same difference.”

“Done deal.”

1998, winter

High school was over and done with; he didn’t feel particularly sad or sentimental during the closing ceremony. His valedictory speech was brief and formal, hitting all the points he was expected to cover. His brother was his lone guest, now sitting in the gym bleachers with a serene expression on his face, his tailored suit unexpectedly elegant against the polished wood of his rickety seat.



“Congratulations, Sasuke-san,” he said seriously, as he rose to meet his approaching brother.

“It is only as father would expect it,” came the dismissive reply.

“Perhaps.” The older man smiled briefly. “Should we dine out tonight?”

“Lunch.”

“If that’s more convenient for you. . .”

“Apologies for the inconvenience, oniisama.”

“Not at all. It’s easily arranged.”

Perhaps, it was so, for Uchiha Itachi. The president of Antigone Logging was known to be a genteel, albeit reticent, young man in the small town he still called home. He was merely part of a huge conglomerate that monopolized many commodities in the eastern countries. Echoes of his aggressive and highly successful maneuvers in the business world filtered slowly as hearsay and gossip among their neighbors. Sasuke paid little attention to these stories, as he had little knowledge of his brother’s activities, with little desire to involve himself in them.

“What business do you have this evening, if I may ask, Sasuke-san?”

“Prom.”

“Ah, I remember now. It’s tradition to hold a formal dance for the seniors after the closing ceremony.”

Tradition was something the brothers were both well-versed with. Virtually every aspect of their daily lives revolved around it. Family decision were reached by referring to “what has always been done,” especially after they were orphaned. This was how Sasuke was raised to become the perfect Uchiha.

“Are you escorting some young lady to this event, as customary?”

“The salutatorian.”

“A pretty little thing that’ll bruise easily. Rather fragile, don’t you think?”

“Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.” Itachi conceded. “You know as well as I do that our family requires women of steel as matriarchs.”

Sasuke couldn’t recall her mother to be as cold and metallic as his brother seemed to often imply. He didn’t retort to Itachi’s insinuations, however. His brother wasn’t baiting him. It was a fair reminder of his duties.

“She’s not a marriage prospect, oniisama,” Sasuke replied candidly. “It would be convenient, however, if they didn’t have to have this yearly exercise of excess.”



“Now, now, little brother. You know we must keep up appearances. Who knows? You might actually have fun.”

Fun? Did this stoic, thirty-year old accused corporate raider truly toss the word, “fun,” at him? Sasuke glanced up when he thought he heard a sigh, but his brother was merely glowering at a fistful of documents, distracted. It must have been a poor attempt at sarcasm. Perhaps, Itachi really was in a celebratory sort of mood.

Uchiha didn’t play around with women, be they barflies or schoolmates. Uchiha most certainly didn’t have fun in that sense of the word, or in any other sense for that matter. He neither expected nor wanted it from his last responsibility in high school. School had always been tedious, but he always exerted enough effort to excel and stand out in its every aspect, even social obligations. The prom was no different.

At any rate, his “date” wasn’t the sort of person you can have the sort of fun his older brother seemed to be suggesting. Sasuke wasn’t even sure she was going to show, at first, but later decided she was going to come no matter what. She was the type who took things seriously, especially when it involved her word being given to another person. All the same, he felt a shadow of satisfaction when he sighted the familiar quizzical crease in between her brows.

He didn’t choose her for her looks; that enough was apparent. She was one of the plainest attired girls in the gathering, and that was saying something in drab, ordinary Konoha. It was a short, sheath-like dress in low-grade satin, a poor attempt to match the color of her eyes. Her knees were knobbly, even though she wasn’t nearly tall enough to be called lanky, just too skinny. The way her shoulders drooped was unflattering, a bad habit she needed to break. The simple knot her baby-fine hair was gathered into suited her well, however, and her half-hearted attempt at make-up wasn’t very visible under the dim lighting.

All in all, she was presentable enough.

“Uchiha-san,” she exclaimed upon sighting him, attempting to jog his way. She stumbled, unused to the modest height added by her heels. “You made it.”

She didn’t sound like she was surprised. Nor did she sound particularly satisfied about it. It was simply a statement of fact to fill the lines with conversation, to hide her feelings of awkwardness, perhaps even inadequacy.

He nodded to acknowledge her and led the way to the space reserved for them, two plastic chairs in a folding table for eight, made presentable by a heavy white table cloth and an arrangement of common flowers. She followed behind him, a staccato of hesitant steps. He drew the chair for her, all manners, and never spoke to her till dinner was served.

She knew, of course, that he chose her out of convenience. She was smarter and more sensible than most people her age. Haruno Sakura was okay, he supposed. She was annoying, like all of the other girls while they were growing up, but she somehow mellowed out and become more tolerable, more sexless, by the time they hit high school.



He saw her often because they were in the same class, were both in the student council, and were often sent to the same academic competitions. One could say he had gotten used to her half-questioning, half-expectant presence. He tolerated her because she didn't try to ingratiate herself into his personal space, even though she did act like he was a packaged bomb that could detonate unexpectedly.

So, yes, she still irritated him, but it was to a slightly lesser degree than most people did.

She picked on her food and said something inconsequential about the dinner. His absent reply was equally inconsequential. It was a serviceable meal, nothing special. She then asked him something, some inane question that warranted no sensible answer. He ignored it, so she turned her unfaltering smile to the couple beside them, engaging in a chirping conversation that grated on his head, some exchange of useless information and idealistic notions.

"I've always wanted to be a doctor." He had no choice but to hear her; he didn't think the effort of shutting her voice out was worth the trouble. "I've always wanted to help people, and I guess, sick ones are the most obvious ones that could use some help. I wasn't a very imaginative child, see."

Sakura laughed, as if finding this very amusing. So she didn't allude her habit of talking to herself to a fertile imagination, he thought ironically. She must either think it normal or simply thought of herself as just plain crazy.

"Truth be told, I'm terrified," she continued, in answer to some question he didn't bother straining for. "I've only been out of Konoha town about five times, and mostly just to Kuni city. We're talking about the National University here. I'm sure it'll be utter culture shock for me, tiny pond fish into a teeming ocean. I'll probably have to study like crazy to be able to cope up with the course requirements and such."

Her conversation partner merely dismissed her fears, piling flattering platitudes unto her instead. She smiled sweetly, unconvinced, but allowing herself to be comforted. Sasuke could almost hear her mentally cursing the unwitting callousness of the replies. He knew well the spitfire behind the amiable mask she wore, having heard her rant countless of times about the stupidity, flightiness, and other unsavory characteristics of people in general. She thought no one was watching.

Well, he wasn't *watching* her. He wasn't following her around due to some misdirected interest. She simply happened to be in many of the places he frequented: the library, the big tree behind the gymnasium, the terrace on the second floor, the rooftop of the school building annex. It wasn't deliberate, and often she was an unwanted distraction. It had nothing to do with her confession back in seventh grade or that she somehow single-handedly taught him high school trigonometry because he found the actual class so repugnant and had tuned out the teacher most days. (Trigonometry was a farce. It was contriving bullshit to justify more bullshit. Ironically, he had gotten pretty good at it, as with a lot of things. After she patiently sat through him gnashing his teeth, that was.)



Her constant cheerfulness was so damned infuriating, he supposed, that he had actually taken to waiting for her veneer of good nature to fail. Somehow it became a habit, a part of his everyday environment. Like picking at a scab, it started to sting when he kept at it long enough. Like any other dumb animal, he kept at it, anyway.

They sat at that lopsided table for the duration of the evening. The music was too loud to start any sort of conversation that didn't involve shouting and he wasn't inclined to waste saliva on small talk. She didn't show any signs of wanting to dance, and he doubted she knew how to, so he didn't ask her. He had been taught a number of folk and formal dances as a child, of course, but gentlemen weren't worth squat those days. It didn't matter.

She must have fallen asleep at some point, because a sudden jolt from some mindless bovine rushing to join some para para dance sent her temple bouncing against his. He caught her before she slammed an eye into his shoulder, and lowered her on head on the table. He didn't bother waking her till the last dance was playing.

"We're here."

She lifted her head and managed to cast an inquiring look through her swollen eyes.

"The end."

She stared at him like he was some unwanted street oracle, ambushing her with a vision so enticing she had to force disbelief.

"Are you daft?"

"No," she said, now awake. "Just sleepy."

He turned and began walking away, choosing a path that didn't require him to cut through the makeshift dance floor. When he didn't hear her uneven steps after the initial screech of the chair being pushed back, he stopped to deliver an impatient look her way.

"Ah." She seemed to realize her gaucherie and had straightened her hunched shoulders. "Thank you for waking me up. Good night, Uchiha-san, and good luck with your college plans."

College plans? He couldn't afford her cute little college plans, shocking to say. His life was minutely blueprinted from birth, and he expended his available time managing his way through it in ways that exceeded everyone's expectations. His decisions affected a family, a company, a town. . . Wishing him good luck on his "college plans" was like asking for some undelineated area of the world to get screw over.

"Good luck with life," didn't have the same tenor.

"I'm walking home with Chouji and Shino," she ventured when he didn't answer her. "We live nearby. Just a few blocks down the road."



That may be, but things weren't so conveniently placed for him. There were certain modes of behavior drilled into his system and one of them was to be exactly polite to females, no matter how exasperating they get. He wasn't about to let a girl walk home at that time of night when he had a perfectly operable vehicle at his disposal.

"This is your graduation gift?" Sakura asked, staring at the unfamiliar fierceness of his European grand tourer. She probably had no clue what name to call it.

"A mere necessity," he answered glibly, though in truth, even his brother wouldn't so casually drop millions of yen for such a flashy car. It was from their uncle, a reclusive man Sasuke knew little about and had little interest in knowing. A thank you was properly polite, however, so Sasuke had consented to a meeting with this obscure relative within the week.

Sakura seemed to take his casual dismissal in stride and silently sank into the front seat, murmuring thanks to him for holding the door open. Nothing remarkable happened during their mostly silent trip. He dropped her off her home and watched her enter her home from inside his car. Her mother and father greeted her at the door. Sasuke nodded to them politely, then left.

He forgot about that night till weeks later, while he lay dying on a the massive five-lane freeway that connected Katon city with the western countries of the continent. The mind was a very strange thing, for it was that night's conversation that played over and over his mind, hypnotic as the flashing lights of the rescue vehicles racing to scrape his mess before it completely coagulated on the asphalt, doggedly continuing even into the long, gray interim that followed.

"You never answered my question about your plans," she said, breaking the silence in the tiny cabin of the Italian car. "I heard you're going to a private university, but that's about it."

"Aa."

"May I ask what you're taking up?"

"Chemical engineering and business administration."

"Now, wasn't that eas—"

"I have no plans," he interrupted, as he parked in front of her house.

"But—"

"I haven't the luxury of choice," he said. "Even second sons of the Uchiha forfeit that right."

She looked at him from the shadows, a curious expression on her face. A shaft of moonlight slashed across her face, touching on one vividly pale eye, an even paler cheek, and the top of one breast. She seemed as vulnerable as his brother had carelessly noted earlier that day, her bare shoulders hunched into a protective gesture, a pretty little



inconsequential weed bending against the wind. Was she pitying him? He wanted to crush her in his hands, bruise and break her, pity *her*.

“We’re here,” he said, his voice devoid of the violence he wished upon her.

“Uchiha-san, don’t you dream?”

“Delusions are easy to relinquish when one has everything.”

“But you yourself admit that it is a right you are giving up.”

“Good night, Haruno.”

She got out of the car, but left the door ajar for uncounted moments. “. . . Then this is goodbye, too, Uchiha-san,” she finally said. “If we bump into each other in Katon city, don’t be a stranger. Sweet dreams.”

He didn’t know whether that was meant to be some curse, for she haunted his dreams thereafter. It was only after he awakened from days of semi-consciousness that her hateful pity was supplanted by the horror of reality. A tube running down his nasal passage and into his throat that seared his insides with each swallow, an elastic velcro binder keeping the contents of his belly in place, and the tubes taped to his arms, to his chest, were only some of the things that kept still when he woke enough to respond to the need,

the sharp, potent desire to have her pale skin bruising under his fingers, her green eyes wide with disbelief, fear, a certain compulsion that froze her like a startled beast, stark against the dark, the moonlight, the aromatic new leather seats. . .

But the permanent blanket of dull pain killed whatever perversion was forming in his mind, and the cresting of sheer agony when he tried to move seared his brain to unbelievable clarity.

His brother was dead.

It was the only time he had ever willfully disobeyed his brother. He was on his way to Metro-Sound, to meet with this uncle of theirs. Itachi had called to forbade it, and Sasuke was suddenly filled with an inexplicable exasperation with the ridiculousness of it. Like that stupid girl Haruno said. Like what he said to her. He hadn’t the luxury of a choice, even with things as simple and stupid as visiting a little known relative, who gave him a sports car on his birthday. It was stupid! When did he ever tolerate stupidity, even from his wonderful, perfect brother?

His brother was never stupid.

It was a first.

Apparently, he was stupid, too, made stupid by that irrational rage. He was driving fast, pushing the unnecessarily powerful GT engine to the heights it was made for. There was a thunderstorm, after weeks of no rain, and the roads were perilous, made



slippery by more than water. When he discovered his brother's car bearing down on him from his rear view mirror, he drove even faster.

Crashed against. Couldn't remember.

Uchiha Itachi died at the scene, from a hemorrhaging liver and a flying piece of metal that pierced a lung. Magically, dramatically, he was able to yank his stupid little brother from his fancy wheels before it exploded into flames. Being the great big brother that he was, he didn't leave Sasuke without words of wisdom.

"Now, wasn't that fun, Sasuke-chan?"

Thereafter, Sasuke always made sure it was.

When he made it out of the hospital, even though he actually survived what they didn't, he did the same thing his parents did, when he was seven years old:

He just never went home.

2008, winter

The old dormitory had its share of ghosts, of course, but she apparently didn't have the gift to sense them, for she had never encountered anything remotely supernatural. Indeed, the concrete walls exuded a certain dullness that made her half-wish *something* would happen. It could get abysmally cold in mornings though, especially when it was Ino who had spent the night by herself. Yuki-Ino they called her, for she luxuriated in turning the thermostat to freezing and snuggling under piles of blankets.

Sakura's ruminations were interrupted by three solid knocks on the door. She had no idea who could be visiting at eight in the morning—no one pleasant, she thought dourly. Ino was already in the hospital, unless she forgot something important enough to bother coming back for. Tenten was due back from a neighboring town today, but not this early. Hinata was visiting home, but there was a chance she would turn up earlier than expected and in need of a friend's comforting presence.

Dozing off on the sofa had blotted out any inclination to move whatsoever, and it took great effort to be able to drag herself to the door. She had undone the bolt before she remembered to peer through the peephole, and she shrank back in terror at the dark eyes that stared back at her. They were no stranger's and it was the familiarity in them that shook her so. Her shift had been dizzyingly busy, but even exhaustion shouldn't have addled her brain that much.

She couldn't believe she could have actually forgotten *that*.

A forty-seven-year-old man with no known medical problems had an unwitnessed syncope during some business meeting last evening.



“Merger talk,” Mr. Yakushi had told her depreciatingly. “The company I represent has quite a bit of a reputation as a . . . hmm, shall we say, a carrion feeder? I was very nervous in the conference room for a little while there and I had to step out. I don’t know what happened next till I woke up and saw the ceiling of the adjoining pantry. My boss will want to kill me when he hears about this.”

His boss did express such sentiments when Sakura met him outside, but for an entirely different reason. The man had been looking unwell for sometime, apparently, and his boss had asked him to see a doctor several times already. The patient had kept minimizing his growing fatigue.

“Boss has a lot going on right now,” he confided. “Not that I’m worried about losing my job, you know. Boss may not be the friendliest guy in the block, but he’s a pretty decent fellow.”

The much-revered boss had turned out to be an old acquaintance of the pretty, young doctor, much to Mr. Yakushi’s amusement. Sakura was able to school her face into a polite smile as she exclaimed over the coincidence of meeting an old schoolmate in such a place and time. Some good came out of it, for the patient became more agreeable to staying in the hospital for observation, after his revered boss assured him of her competence. (As if she needed the endorsement of a sort-of-ex-boyfriend to vouch for the quality of care of the hospital, not only hers.) At any rate, she was forced to play polite and spend a ten-minute break with the man, forcing herself in a mind frame where everything was just nice and peachy and perfectly normal. She wasn’t assailed by reminiscences that twisted daggers in her guts and made her want to hurl the tepid, stale coffee across the E.R. nurses station. That would have made her unpopular with the nursing staff, among other things.

At any rate, she had managed to survive the brief meeting without spontaneously combusting or accusing the man of being a callous, monumentally evil bastard for never even having the courtesy of hinting that he still lived. In retrospect, she thought herself awesome for accomplishing such a feat. Such honesty would have flavored the conversation with too much bitterness. He didn’t *need* to know she spent years looking, waiting. . .

Another set of knocks brought her back to her senses, though evidently not completely. Some auto-pilot glitch made her open the door to her unwanted visitor.

“Sasuke-san,” she croaked, summoning the pleasant-faced mask hastily. “Another surprise?”

He looked the same as he did earlier, steeped in a mental exhaustion that echoed hers. Black leather shoes, creased by years of use, was diligently polished into a venerable sheen. A pair of gray slacks, toasty, more expensive than her entire meager wardrobe. His coat, which had formerly kept a foreign ungulate alive up some frigid mountain, hung open to reveal his loosened tie and a frumpy dress shirt, untucked. The crimson on white, the white against the dark gray, was familiar to her, had painted themselves on her mind earlier, occupied as it had been with a sulfurous internal diatribe.



A remnant of those virulent thoughts bounced sluggishly about her skull. Their general tone now was a dull ache . . . totally unacceptable, inescapable.

He shook his dark hair from his eyes, a gesture that crossed his line of sight with hers. The shadows under his lower lids were testaments to the amount of sleep he had gotten the previous night (perhaps, nights before that), but his eyes were alert, bright, more alive than she had ever seen them. He was still accursedly handsome for all his faults. She thought this utterly unfair.

“I saw you walking home from the third floor,” he said by way of explanation.

“That’s called stalking in some circles.”

He shook his head imperceptibly. “Bad luck. He wanted to know if it was snowing.”

“Mine or yours?” she murmured ironically. “Anyway, I won’t offer you any more coffee—”

“That’s fine.” He paused. “Are you letting me in?”

“You can come in, if you want to.”

“Yes, I know.” Yet he stood waiting, watching.

“I’m not sure you may,” she amended. “Or should.”

“You promised another meeting.”

“I did agree to your promise, didn’t I? Let’s get it over with.”

She let him come and removed a stack of textbooks from one end of the sofa. He sat and watched her through hooded eyes. Or perhaps that was just the lighting, drab and minimal, struggling through the closed venetian blind. Nonetheless, she checked to make sure she was decently dressed and hadn’t started peeling of her clothes the moment she reached home. It wasn’t as surreptitious a gesture as she was trying for.

“What do you want to talk about?” she asked, sitting on a tea-stained ottoman across from him. “You hardly said anything while we were having coffee earlier.”

“Neither did you.”

“Stale coffee in the staff break room’s hardly conducive for a ‘closure’ dialogue. Besides, I’ve never been in there before, except for that one time I begged for crackers from one of the nurses and I was about to pass out then.”

“What should we talk about?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She stood up, unable to sit still with his eyes directly on her. “Apologies may be in order, but see, I don’t really need them. I’ve examined and analyzed it from every angle, and I’ve concluded that there’s been a mere misunderstanding between us, all those years ago. It was an unfortunate but simple conflict of interest. I admit I still vacillate from this inference once in a while and I still



chew on this conundrum sometimes, some boring lazy night I don't have anything scheduled—kinda like a rubix cube, only I hate those things, so no—but I've put it all behind me. And while it has been proven that I really am horribly unimaginative, a pathetic mass of neural pathways devoid of anything non-academic, I'm glad to learn that my coping and ego defense mechanisms remain intact." She stopped and took a deep breath. "I can't do this, I don't think. I can't talk. Can we talk some other time?"

"I'm not inclined to talk either," he said, keeping his gaze on her openly.

A sliver of irritation shot through her, but the look she shot him was anxious. "You've never admitted that, you know," she accused. "Watching me, I mean. When I suggested it, you acted like I was some love-struck ditz, like I was delusional. I thought I was overly self-conscious."

He nodded, as if in acknowledgment. She didn't know to which part he agreed, if at all.

"I can't do this. Really. Can you leave? Please?"

She gestured stiffly to the door. When he didn't stir from the couch, she grabbed him by the forearm and dislodged the knuckle from underneath his chin. He merely straightened, shook free from her grip, and took the same hand in his.

"This is. . . how should I call it? Retrograde." She stared at him anxiously. "You've never held my hand, not openly. It was always under the pretense of catching me from falling into open manholes or keeping me from being swept away by the crowd. Then afterwards, you'd toss it away, like I'm venomous."

She tugged at the hand he held. It was half-hearted, but the weak-whiplash still imbalanced her.

"How cliched," she sniffled, though her voice, she had to admit quivered as he steadied her in his arms and pulled her into sitting position. "Who've you been hanging out with? What happened to cool unromantic Uchiha Sasuke? He was predictable, at least. He was unfathomable, too, but he was a little less crazier than you."

"Shut up," he murmured to her nose, before adjusting his aim. His lips were cold, wind-burned, and tasted vaguely of salt.

"That was our first kiss."

He didn't answer but tried for the second. She pushed him back with a hand on each arm, her grip tighter than necessary. There was silence while she attempted to regroup.

"I didn't really mind," she finally, carefully said. "Whatever the heck it was we had." She dislodged herself from him and pulled him to a standing position. "Ino-chan told me you were only using me. I was never sure what for, and Ino was never able to get whatever she wanted to say across without ending up gibbering with rage. I figured I was



using you, too. You made me feel . . . I don't know. Part of a mysterious, special thing. I felt singular and unique, a tad less forlorn.

"Isn't that weird? Considering how you are you, and all.

"Maybe I thought I was saving you. You know how kids develop hero complexes? Heroine complex in my case.

"And the sex wasn't bad. Even though we only did it once. And I don't really have a basis of comparison, if you have to know."

"I do."

"Well, shucks, thanks awfully. Too much information. But, hey, I'm willing to forgive, that and the six-year disappearance. That's what you want to do, right? Go back to how we were back in college? I don't mind really, but there's just one problem."

"Is there?" he answered quietly. "I thought there was more than one."

"This is the most important one, at any rate."

She tucked in the front of his shirt and straightened his tie, as if she's been doing it all her life. She buttoned his coat up, patted him, and tiptoed slightly to reach his mouth. When he didn't protest, she deepened the kiss brusquely, then pulled away for a complete severance.

"I don't love you, anymore, Sasuke. Goodbye and thank you for the chance to say it."

He looked at her for a long time, in his usual undecipherable way, so long that she thought she might have to give a more potent argument. He nodded, just as she was about to open her mouth, and made for the door.

"Liars know liars," he said, just before the door shut.

She tried to sleep, which should have been easy, but she couldn't. She couldn't cry to exhaustion either, because her eyes remained dry and open. The process of mourning had been so long stretched out, so long delayed that she couldn't quite remember where she had left off. What had covered that truncation, that gaping hole? Time. The mundane. The wound edges smoothed out, approximated. The infection remained, of course, abscessed, merely tunneled underneath to remain unseen and unknown. How could she have known the devastation was this far-reaching? Everybody had a fling or two. Even her. Why did she have to hurt just because she never admitted that was what it was?

She stumbled from her bed and went to the door. She opened it to his expectant eyes. He was sitting beside her door, in the aseptic, fluorescent-white hallway that belied the passage of time her clocks proclaimed.

"I'm a liar, too," he said.



They made love in her bed. For closure, she claimed through hiccoughs. For salutation, he insisted in turn, and she almost believed it. But then she woke up, just as the sun was setting, to an empty bed, and her room and apartment the way they've always been, dull and devoid. She supposed, she could have gone on thinking it was merely a dream, that maybe she had accidentally been exposed to some drug earlier, but then Tenten had confronted her about her visitor.

"You're the last person I expected to break this rule, Sakura," the older woman chided. "I thought 'No men in the apartment,' was pretty clear cut."

"Not a man."

"Oh?"

"A phantom."

2008, summer

When he was a boy growing up, was still gullible and easy to please, his mother sat him on an oddly-situated tree stump on the driveway leading up the hill where their ancient house perched and told him to stay very still and very quiet. There was hardly any wind, but there it was, he could hear the murmuring of the trees as they conversed among themselves. The secret conferences could be heard from any part of Konoha town, he learned, but then with time, he also learned that the slight wind was created by the variances in temperature, of shifts in energy whose rules have been deciphered by science, which was then hammered into his mind in short, simplified tenets by his school teachers. It was just one of those things mothers told their children to pacify them, like saying they'll never not come home, or you can attain anything if you want it enough. Fate had made a liar out of his mother, but that was inevitable, irreversible. So when Sakura repeated the story of convening trees when they were walking in Katon City Park one evening, five years ago, he had paid attention. This he told her as they pulled up the main street of Konoha.

"I can't say I remember that," she admitted, squinting as she tried to navigate by moonlight and the rare street lamp. "But those days, I could have told you absolutely anything and never predict when you'll answer. I mean, really answer and start a discussion of sorts. Like that time I was complaining about how I didn't get to go home as often as I wanted to. You said you didn't understand what was so appealing about this static, uninteresting town, that it was all due to some misplaced sentimentality I wanted to see it again. I wanted to punch your lights out."

"I remember that part. I can't remember what made you hellishly pissed."

"I was baiting you into convincing me to disregard my extra-co stuff and go home instead. I wished you had just vaguely nodded the way you usually did."



It was past midnight, but the earth still emitted the heat it had absorbed that prolonged day. He could feel it from the open window, in between the cooling wisps of breezes the silent town sentinels fanned towards them. He wasn't sure where to go, so in a way, he was glad it was her at the helm. He wasn't sure where she meant to go yet: her parents' house, Kakashi and Iruka's orphanage, or the empty Uchiha mansion looming like a smudge in the horizon.

"There was something seductive about conversing with you," she continued. "Kinda like thrill-seeking, like driving buzzed or dancing with a stranger—not that I've done either, unless dancing with you that first time in Club Mandala counts. Most of the time, you don't answer. At others, you elicit the strangest reactions from me. I either get irrationally mad or dizzily gratified. Disturbing, at any rate. Why's that you think?"

"We're going to that house," he said sharply.

"Yes," she replied calmly, though she bit her lower lip. "We're going to your house."

He stilled, not to think of an excuse, but to listen. The trees were murmuring.

"Is that a problem?"

"No."

She smiled. It was a thin smile. Even that sliver of a moon was a beacon in the unadulterated darkness of the countryside, and he could see that—

She smiled a thin smile. Dawn was hours ago, but sunlight could barely break through the winter air, thick with snow about to fall. The strange non-light that leaked through the periphery of the cheap drape on the lone window leached off her color, and she was impossibly paler against the light blue wallpaper. The smile was meant to be encouraging not even directed to him, he supposed. But it was enough that he knew she was breaking and rearranging inside, over and over, as they walked the short, narrow corridor to her room. Even as she locked the door and turned her expectant eyes on him, startling in their intensity despite the monochrome of early morning, the sepia of despair, she reached for his hand and twined her fingers with his.

She reached for his hand almost impatiently, assisting him out of the truck, though he hardly needed help.

"Eager," he noted.

"I suppose you can say that, Uchiha-sama," she conceded. "Anxious, actually."

"I won't run."

"Oh, I won't even try to catch you. I'm dead on my feet."

He began walking to the enormous house. The way the trees were oriented about it left a considerable amount of clearing around the house, but they still created ample shadows to shroud it from the touch of the moon. He stopped at the threshold. Beside



him, his companion shivered, perhaps rethinking the practicality of such an expedition at such an hour.

“You do have a key, don’t you?” she ventured timidly.

“Aa.”

She chuckled nervously. “Saves me from embarrassment. I dragged you here and all.”

“Should I warn you of what to expect?”

“Well, I am about to jump out of my skin. Is it that obvious?”

“A well-polished foyer,” he said in answer. “There’s a caretaker who comes to the house weekly. When my brother and I lived here, there were more servants and they came more frequently, but they never stayed the night. The nights were always quiet.”

“It must have been lonely.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have a basis of comparison till after you. Silences were never oppressive before then.”

“Oh?”

“I was seven when they died,” he continued. “I’ve had this house to myself for eleven years thereafter. I can navigate my way around it well enough.”

As he expected, the foyer was gleaming, from its marble floor to the cascade of crystals rippling down the chandelier, from the mirror that hung above a curio stand to the ivory carvings it held. Even the leaves of the potted fortune plant harshly reflected the incandescence from overhead. It wasn’t a welcoming sight, but it was familiar. It seemed smaller than he remembered, less grandiose, less imposing.

“Where to first?” she asked, after he had stood there by the front door long enough.

He didn’t trust himself to speak, so he took her hands in his and tugged lightly towards the direction of the living room.

She tugged lightly to bring him closer to her. He saw her swallow her nervousness as she padded to him slowly. It was to her throat he first went, nipping experimentally at her jowl before scattering kisses around her mouth. There was no need to rush, he thought, for it was a dream and her reaction to his every touch merely reinforced his disconnectedness to time, to reality.

She was running her hands through his hair, about his face, his neck, down his back, no more hurried than he was. Her lips kept seeking his and remained occupied with this game of hunting and detaching. She seemed to find his taste as intoxicating as he did hers, for she seemed to go back to kissing his mouth after meandering down to his shoulder, lower to his chest and belly, or even lower still, joining their tongues hastily, in short frequent reunions.



They entered the dining hall, where a long, rarely-used table of hardwood dominated the space. It has been in the family for several generations, a fact he didn't bother to announce. This place, too, was flawlessly clean like a set straight out of a magazine. Same with the kitchen, with its old-fashioned gas stove and its fairly modern refrigerator. Sasuke watched as his companion took it all in with no more than cursory glances at each corner of the rooms, her green eyes a tad wild.

"I've never seen a ghost while I lived here," he said.

"Which doesn't guarantee there isn't," she retorted. Then, rethinking her unwitting admission of fear. "This is Konoha's traditional ghost house," she explained. "I've had my share of fun shaking in my boots over ridiculous tales about your vindictive ancestors."

"I haven't been here since oniisama died. I can't guarantee he isn't haunting the place."

"Ahahaha. . . but Itachi-san didn't die here, did he?"

"He died in Byakko Turnpike in March '98, in a high-speed chase with his younger brother. Former didn't want latter to meet with a distant uncle, Madara."

Sakura's face was conflicted. Likely, she was unsure on how to approach the conversation, unsure if she was allowed to breach such a topic without prying too deeply and shutting him down.

Sasuke continued for her sake. "Madara had broken off from the family about half a century ago. You know the issue about the 1957 Forest Conservation Act?"

"It limited the area, number, and species of trees a company can cut in a specified amount of time. Your family was directly affected by it, more so than an average Konoha citizen."

"Madara had gone to extreme means to counter the legislation of the law. There was a scandal, everybody took sides . . . casualties. The family broke into two."

"The story of the Uchiha feud," Sakura recalled. "It was mostly in the business world that it was played out."

"My father, I learned later, was supposed to be particularly vicious. Itachi took his place and more than filled his shoes."

"Itachi-san was afraid Madara would hurt you somehow?"

"Or manipulate me," he said gravely. "He had kept me ignorant of the whole debacle. It would have been easy to indoctrinate me to Madara's business tactics."

"...Wow. It's almost fearsome how your family's used the global economy as some sort of chess game."

"It's not my brother's only reason."



“Hmm?”

“I think he was being stupid that night.”

“Stupid?”

“He didn’t want me driving.”

“Who? Itachi-san?”

“Our parents died in a car crash, too.”

There was a deafening crash when her lamp fell. She knocked into it when she jerked violently.

Childishly, she stopped her mouth against the interesting sounds he was eliciting from her. He saw this as challenge and wondered if she could stay silent against a texture she seemed so fascinated by only moments earlier.

He drank her sight, standing there against the floor-to-ceiling windows in the staircase. Her body was profiled against the starry sky and the crescent moon. She was beautiful, of course, albeit too thin. It took him years to admit it, much less tell her.

“Did you say something?”

She stopped midstep, twisting around halfway up the stairway, questioning.

He shook his head and continued his long-paused narrative.

“Compression fractures: L2-4. A cracked pelvis. Splenic laceration and perforated bowels. I had to have—what do you call that pouch that collected stool?—a colostomy. And my surgical incision had to be left open. They stuffed gauze in my belly several times a day. They couldn’t close it because I heal too quickly and my guts twined into each other.”

“You were much better when we met in Charcoal street,” she remarked quietly. He could see her digesting the medical terms he was casually enumerating. Her expression was calm enough, but her face had gone paler, obviously painting a vivid picture in her mind. “Discounting your drug problem, that is.”

“Discounting a number of things, actually.”

“Where do I figure?”

“Another distraction.”

“Until I became the source of conflict? You said you brought me to your parents’ condo for an exorcism, and that it didn’t work.”

“Not immediately. You know the story.”

“I thought them cruel to just let you go without even telling me. I understand the legalities involved now. I’ve never had the right.”



“Madara took me under his wing after the accident. He visited me, kept track of my progress in rehab, schooled me in the workings of Antigone Logging and its parent company Akatsuki International, and updated me with the business affairs. He was ten times the father I could only vaguely remember, so I listened to him. Most of the time, I told myself, I had no choice.”

“Did you?”

“Did I?”

“So he took you under his wing and took over the holdings of your branch of the Uchiha,” Sakura surmised. “Did somebody bring it to your attention, or did you merely realize he was using you?”

“My uncle’s enemies,” he answered with an ironic smile. “Orochimaru Electronics disliked the stronger, newer Akatsuki International. Everything came to light. Our companies tore each other to pieces.”

“Before or after us?”

“During and after. I dropped out of school again to fix the mess.”

“Around the same time you dropped out of sight?”

“Aa,” he smirked in spite of himself. “Out of yours.”

She sniffed indignantly. “I might have told you already: you are such an ass sometimes.”

He nodded, and they drifted into silence.

“Are you done?” she asked, minutes, rooms later.

“Almost. A degree in a year. I’m more or less contented with my executive staff. They’ll be handling Antigone Logging for the most part.”

He stopped before a bedroom door in the east wing, deep in thought. She stopped as well, hand hovering about his forearm.

“My brother’s room.”

“It’s okay, if—”

He shook his head. “The traces of him here would be minimal. Oniisama didn’t make much of a mark in this house. I’ve learned more about him by perusing his work in the company, dealing with the people he dealt with. Whatever he left in this room more than likely pales against the ghosts in the company office, even in our remotest outpost in the mountains.”

She stepped up beside him and opened the door.

“Dusty,” she remarked.



“The servants habitually skipped this room. My brother valued his personal space.”

“You’ve never been in here?”

“Once. To see to his will.”

They didn’t go any further than a few steps. She didn’t seem to want to go further into the room, and he didn’t want to tread further than she would. Only silhouettes of the bed and the chest drawers were visible. Their aromatic, hardwood smell was more discernable than their huge sizes.

“I should clean here.”

“Not tonight.”

“Aa.”

They left the room, the smell of wood mixed with an aged musk burst on their faces as they closed the door. It lingered and followed them as they entered the last room at the end of the hallway.

She smelled of sweat, caffeine, and baby powder. It was the sort of smell that recounted the intermittent rush of adrenaline, the smell that bodies produced when either highly stressed or highly excited. Her skin tasted of salt, tasted of him. Her hair smelled faintly of flowers; it was an old smell.

Because time didn’t exist, he didn’t settle with the little that escaped her. He delved deep to inhale her, to sate both their nerves with the rush of sensations, impulses.

“Your parent’s room.”

“Aa.”

“Roomy and open. I like it.”

He nodded.

“The watercolor paintings. They’re in the condo, too. Are they your mother’s?”

“Evidently. I don’t remember her doing anything but mothering me. Then, she was dead.”

He watched as she wandered around the room, examining the furniture, the massive bed, the hand-sewn quilt that seemed quaint against the pervading opulence of the marble floor, the gilding, and the crystal figurines.

“I learned more about both of them when I started visiting our various properties. The condo unit was one of them. She and my father liked to stay there, apparently, even well before their marriage. They walked about Charcoal Street often when they were young. Mother studied in National University. Father visited her every weekend.”



“They went to the same places we did,” supplied Sakura in a whisper. “Oh, Sasuke.”

Veneration and accusation both, her harsh whispers served as his fulcrum. He swung from end to end of the spectrum spanning sanity, a pendulum, a metronome, synchronizing with the tiniest sound she made. The stream of nonsense from her lips varied in pitch and volume, manifested no patterns to follow. It was the rhythm of their bodies that dictated, deeper or harder or simply more moremore, she let him know with each nuanced response.

They reached his room eventually, the exact opposite of his parents’ bedroom, at the end of the west wing. It was a spartan room, with the same heavy headboard and the mattress deep enough to drown in. Other than the bed, a desk, and a chair, it was an empty room, made seemingly emptier by the span of windows that gazed out to the thick ocean of trees and the thickly starred night sky of about three in the morning. His walk-in closet contained a spattering of clothes from various stages of his childhood, while on his desk was a sheaf of papers, each unrelated to the other: an unfinished physics homework, a draft of an essay on macroeconomics, notes she lent him on trigonometric identities.

“Are you done now?” she asked again.

“If you’re referring to my monologue, for now, yes.”

“It would always be ‘for now,’ you know,” she said sagely. “You’ll only be definitely done once you’re dead.”

“Which is why I called you a month ago.”

Surprise flickered across her face.

“I didn’t expect to see you in that hospital.”

“You mean, if I didn’t happen to be the doctor of your important subordinate, you wouldn’t have even said hi to me.”

He nodded.

“It’s getting old now, but you are an ass,” she murmured. “Really.”

“Aa.”

“So this was all due to chance, huh? Our meeting in the hospital was just coincidence, which happened to lead to this little trek back to good old Konoha. I’ve been wondering, since then, about what it all meant, and I realized we are both being given a chance of closure. So. Here we are.”

In between drowning in her long, leisurely kisses, he stared back at her pellucid eyes, unable to read their meaning or distinctly see the green behind the reflection on their surface. Their storm was contained and neat, a blissful ride that languorously floated to its resolution, to its last longing sigh. And it felt right to have her boneless body



draped across his. It felt right to feel her every breath and the brisk thrum of her heart beat till it slowed and faded into calm.

It was different, however. There was nothing to compare to. There were no memories to go back to compare, because in his myriad of dreams, they had never reached this far, never gone over the crests. Lust tended to truncate his imaginings into swift, snatches of visions, compartmentalized into a sound, an image, or a sensation, not the synergy of one whole act. The deep-seated joy he was emerging from was nothing short of an aberration.

She was perched on the footboard, feet dangling.

“Let’s say, there’s a couple who had a falling out and then separated,” she explained. “One day they meet again and the boy decides he wants to try again. The girl can say, ‘I’m different now; it wouldn’t work.’ You follow?”

He nodded.

“In my case, I can’t even say that. I have—I have no basis of comparison. What constitutes ‘us’? What’s different between ‘us’ then and ‘us’ now?”

She paused for a while, taking the opportunity to breath deeply and to choose her words.

“I just don’t know you,” she said earnestly. “I don’t know you enough to possibly risk my sanity . . . or my heart, for that matter. No crash course on Uchiha Sasuke could ever make me confident enough to enter such a challenge.

“I’m a rational person. You know that, right? My brain is my only redeeming factor. I’m mediocre in every other aspect. I’ve found out through experience, that whenever I get cocky and decide I want to reject the plain, stark truths my intellect posits to me, I get in trouble.”

She gazed at him, eyes moon-like, mysterious with the mourning shimmer on their wet glaze.

“You’re too much,” she concluded. “I’m sorry. We can’t go back to how we were.”

“I’m not sorry.”

Her eyebrows crinkled at his curt response. The hurt on her face was swift to spread, he noted, unmasked. “I did my part,” she murmured, resolute. “Please respect it.”

“I’m sorry for a great number of things I’ve done,” he said. “But I’m not sorry we can’t go back. Now, we can be friends.”

Her expression was rife with suspicion. She wasn’t sure what to think of this. “Friends?” she repeated. “Because you’ve said some really outrageous things tonight and ‘I’m sorry,’ is the only thing that tops, ‘Let’s be friends.’ Those two fairly outdid your



other confessions by. . . three hundred million ri, four-point-three light years, a googol, some ridiculously macrocosmic number, at any rate.” She shook her head. “Why—?”

“Meeting you in Club Mandala was chance, you said. So was meeting in Katon Hospital. I’ve been passed over so many times before. If you are fate’s apology for my parents and my brother, I can’t keep ignoring it.”

“If you put it that way, I suppose I haven’t got a choice, do I?”

They were silent. He walked away from the window and came to sit beside her. Her eyes were drooping, and he could feel her swaying slightly towards him.

“We should exorcize this room, too.”

“What?”

He smirked as her mouth flopped open and shut, the red streaking her cheek burning more intensely as she deciphered his meaning.

“That’s not going to work, you know.”

“So you’ve said.”

“It’s not going to work, you know,” her voice was distant. It wasn’t just the bad reception that made her sounds so. She had enclosed herself with ice and a deliberating stubbornness. She was good at pretending in many things; this was not one of them. “You think I don’t know what you did? You called from my phone when you trespassed four months ago—”

“Collusion by silence.”

“Don’t you dare try to twist—” Ire was good, he thought, much better than a calculated indifference. Still, he shouldn’t test her to the point of forcing her to refuse even speaking to him. He shouldn’t. “Never mind. But it’s not going to work.”

Despair now. It laced her words with a pungent flavor, but the underlying tone was still grim determination. She was blocking him, rejecting him, denying his very existence. She was healthy and normal and sane. She would protect herself from him. She would have him debase himself, would have him beg. And for what? What, who, was she?

“You can’t just ingratiate your way into my life by setting up intermittent apparitions in my bedroom,” she continued through his wordless, even breathing. “Normal girls . . . normal people don’t usually fraternize with ghosts. Should I flatter myself that I’m one of your few links to life? I could, of course, but that’s not really healthy, is it? There’ll always be the question of ‘why me?’”

“That may be,” he admitted after another long silence. “But if there’s anybody haunting anybody, it’s you.”

“Oh, please—”



"I'm a pragmatist. I don't want to spend the rest of my life sifting through memories and be unable to reconcile between what happened and what could have. I don't like conjuring up explanations. I don't like remembering. I hate dreaming."

"..."

"I don't know the answer to your question, but I've never been averse to challenge, have I?"

"Okay." He could see her chewing on her lower lip. "Fine. Meet me in front of the hospital at three o'clock on the 27th of next month. It's a Monday. I'll go wherever you want me to."

"Aa."

"And a promise."

"Yes."

"You will do the talking, and you will be honest."

"Fine. I'll see you."

"Good night."

"It's morning."

"Good morning, then."

He watched her walk to her house under the moonlight. He remembered doing the same, about ten years ago, but she was an idealistic dreamer back then, while he was a lost and angry boy. She turned back once to wave at him, then she was admitted into the small, homey bungalow with sleepy exclamations. He stayed a few moments, just long enough to see the door shut, then resigned himself to some good-natured ribbing from his adoptive family.

Old man Kakashi would be yawning in between his insinuating comments, while that idiot Naruto would be boisterously complaining about interrupted sleep. Iruka-san would have breakfast ready a few hours early, then maybe Sasuke would get to catch up on sleep. After that, more confession. . .

Exorcisms, he thought, were quite fun, after all. Who better to have fun with than a friend?

2012, spring

The sight of the petite, pink-haired woman toddling about the hallways had become familiar to the hospital employees. Her white lab coat, as of late, has become taut over her burgeoning belly, so she was wont to leave it open. Her brown leather loafers



seemed to do just fine in keeping her feet comfortable, and it still squeaked against the polished floors when she turned a corner too quickly. However, she was in a peach summer dress and a knit sweater when she stepped out of the doctors' lounge that afternoon, appearing much daintier and younger than usual to her colleagues. She was on her way home.

"I heard you were going on leave, doctor," remarked one of the nurses as she passed by the telemetry unit. "Are you due soon?"

"Not for a few weeks," Sakura said with a laugh. "It's my husband, see. He's in paranoid mode now, wants his wife in a padded enclosure somewhere reclusive." She waved her cell phone in mock exasperation. "This might be him again. He was supposed to pick me up at three and it's already four-thirty."

She finally reached the main entrance of the hospital, trailed by greetings and well-wishes. A luxurious black car pulled up almost immediately, rather to her embarrassment. When she opened the door, she was met by a familiar smile.

"Five missed calls," she said, as she plopped in the back seat. "Did you miss me that terribly?"

"Naturally," came the amiable greeting. "How's my fat and ugly breeding sow?"

"Don't test me, handsome," she returned. "Or I'll demand a pee stop at the worst possible place in the freeway."

"I've actually brought you a portable urinal this time, Sakura-san."

"Why, that's very sweet of you, Sai-san, but contrary to your endearing opinion, I am not a dog."

"Your own words, Sakura-san, your own words."

Their bickering was cut short by the ring of her cell phone.

"So you miss me that much," she said upon picking up the call. "Seven missed calls and fifteen text messages. Really, *anata*."

"Shut up," the crisp rejoinder was heard throughout the cabin.

"Careful," Sakura admonished. "You're on a speaker phone, so you shouldn't say anything horribly out of character. By the way, why do you insist on sending your most irritating assistant when picking me up for these picnic trips?"

"He has the safest driving record in my staff."

"Have you ever considered I might end up killing him at some point?"

"That would be annoying. He's a fairly competent VP."

"He never forgets your blue checkered blanket, I'll give him that, but he doesn't cook as well as Iruka-san. Will you be driving the rest of the way to Usa Village?"



“Aa. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“In an hour, then,” Sakura agreed, smiling. “I’ll see you, Sasuke-kun.”

Punk Rock Princess

The door was painted a hideous rust-red, splotchy in some parts and uneven in others. The wood of the door was splintering, the doorknob was coated with dust, and the thick green grime under her feet read ‘We c me’ in faded letters.

Sakura took a breath and covered her hand with a tissue. Then she leaned forward, raised a fist, and knocked on the door.

She could hear noises from inside: laughter, conversation, someone yelling either ‘ramen’ or ‘I’m in!’—she couldn’t quite tell—and then, over the sound of socializing, another sound: footsteps, drawing near.

For one wild moment, she thought of running back the way she came, but then she steeled herself—she had come this far for a reason—and rocked back on her heels just as the door swung open, just far enough for a pale face and dark eyes to peer out.

“Yeah?” The voice was gruff—but cautious. Sakura understood, even if she knew she posed no threat.

“Sasuke?”

The door opened a little wider—though, Sakura couldn’t help but notice, Sasuke kept his hand firmly on the doorframe, arm blocking her way into the one-story house.

“Yeah?” he said again.

“Um,” Sakura began, horribly aware of the way he was staring at the small white suitcase by her feet, “I’m Sakura. I’m-I’m a friend of Karin’s.”

He didn’t react. Sakura wondered if she had somehow gotten the wrong house.

“She said you could help me,” she went on, more timidly now. “I’m, um, I—”

Sasuke noticed her tissue-covered hand then, and his lips twisted in a smirk. He glanced up at her, gaze cold and calculating. He then stepped back, dropping his arms to his sides.

“Come in,” he said.





Sakura stuffed her tissue into the pocket of her jeans, picked up her suitcase, and stepped over the threshold. She found herself in a large room, with mismatched couches and chairs gathered around a TV and coffee table on the far side. The floor was hardwood and dusty, covered by a thin, forest-green rug. Just inside the door was a small closet, the sliding doors half-open to reveal an assembly of coats and shoes, so many shoes, that spilled out onto the floor by her feet.



Sakura slipped off her black ankle boots and stepped further into the house. Sasuke had already wandered off towards the couches, where three other boys sat, and she hastened to follow, dragging her suitcase behind her.

“Sasuke, get me a soda,” one boy—a blond—shouted over the noise of the TV. Then, he did a double-take. “Wha—who’s she?”

“Sakura,” Sasuke said, taking a seat on a beaten, black leather recliner. “Get your own soda.”

“I’m a friend of Karin’s,” Sakura supplied, when the other boys turned to look at her as well. Behind them, the sounds of a car chase chimed on from the television. “She sent me.”

“You’re beautiful,” the blond said abruptly, and Sakura flushed. “I’m Naruto.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “And, um, thank you.”

Naruto grinned. The brunette beside him rolled his eyes.

“I’m Kiba, by the way. And that’s Shikamaru,” he added, indicating the boy sprawled across a navy blue loveseat.

“Hello,” Sakura said, trying to hide her concern. Did only *guys* live here? How could she stay with them, especially since they were all strangers?

“Ino lives here too,” Sasuke said, gaze fixed on the television screen. “She just went out to get dinner.”

She? “Oh, okay,” Sakura said. “So, uh...”

“Why don’t you sit?” Naruto offered, shoving Kiba over to make room beside him. He picked up the remote from the coffee table and finally, mercifully, turned the TV off. “Tell us your story.”

Sakura sat, stared around at the expectant faces watching her, and wondered where to begin. “I ran away,” she said finally.

“Well, no shit,” Kiba snorted. “But *why?*”

Sakura shifted uncomfortably. “It’s complicated.”

Kiba opened his mouth to say something, but Naruto cut him off before he could speak. “It’s okay,” he said, shooting Kiba a warning glance. “You don’t have to tell us. We respect people’s privacy around here.”

It was Shikamaru’s turn to snort. “Right,” he said flatly. “Privacy.”

Naruto smiled sheepishly.

“So how do you know Karin?” Kiba asked.

“Oh, she worked at the café I always go to. I was stuck there one day when it was raining. She dropped me home, and we started talking. She was a good friend.”



“‘Was’?”

Sakura cast her gaze down to her denim-covered knees.

“She died,” she whispered. “In a car accident. That was when I left.”

There was silence for a moment. Then, abruptly, there were footsteps and the slam of a door. When Sakura looked up again, Sasuke was gone.

“They had a thing,” Naruto clarified in a low voice, catching sight of Sakura’s expression. “A long time ago.”

Karin had never mentioned that.

“Oh,” was all Sakura could think of to say.

Sasuke didn’t leave his room until the next morning. By that time, Sakura had already met Ino, moved into her room, and cried herself to sleep during the night, hugging the one picture of her parents she had brought along with her.

“Morning, sunshine!” Ino sang at eight-thirty in the morning, as she came into the kitchen, a small room beside the main room. A hall stretched away from the entrance to three bedrooms—one for Ino and Sakura; one for Naruto and Kiba; and one for Sasuke and Shikamaru—and a single bathroom. “Sleep well? You’re up so early!”

Indeed, Sakura was the only one at the table, drinking a glass of juice and reading through a week-old newspaper.

“I always wake up at this time,” Sakura said. “It’s a habit by now, I guess.”

“And habits are meant to be broken,” Ino said wisely. “Give it a week, you’ll be waking up at noon in no time.”

“*You’re* up,” Sakura pointed out.

“I just had to wake up to pee. Today was a fluke. You’ll see.”

Two weeks later, Sakura woke up at ten in the morning. She sat in bed for a moment, staring at the clock.

Later that afternoon, she went out and bought herself an alarm clock.

“What are you reading?”

Sakura looked up from where she sat on the loveseat. Sasuke stood before her. He was wearing shoes and carrying his house keys.

“*Cinderella*. Are you going somewhere?”



“Work. Aren’t you too old for fairy tales?”

“Do *you* think I’m old?” Sasuke wisely didn’t answer. Sakura smiled. “Maybe. But I love this particular one. When the prince goes out to find her with only one shoe as a clue... it’s sweet, right?”

“It would never work in the real world.”

“It *could*.”

Sasuke smirked. “You’re a dreamer.” At her expression, he added, “That isn’t a bad thing.”

Sakura didn’t know what to say to that.

“I have to go. The others should be back soon. Will you be all right alone?”

Sakura flushed. “I’m a big girl. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Sasuke smirked again. “Right. Call me if you need anything, my number’s on the fridge. Bye.”

Sakura watched him go. Then she turned back to her book, biting back a smile she didn’t fully understand.

“What are you reading?”

“*Why* are you reading?”

Sakura laughed and set her book down on her lap. “*Cinderella*, and because I like to,” she said to Naruto and Kiba. “I have nothing else to do, anyway. What do you guys do for fun around here?”

“Eat, drink, and be merry,” Kiba said.

“And work. Sometimes,” Naruto added. “Isn’t *Cinderella* kind of... for kids?”

“I *am* a kid,” Sakura said defensively. Naruto plopped down beside her, and Kiba took the recliner. “Where’s Ino? Didn’t she go out with you guys?”

“Yeah, so did Shikamaru.” Kiba smirked. “So we decided to give them some time alone.”

“Oh. Shikamaru and Ino... like each other?”

“Yup. But they won’t admit it.”

“And Sasuke and Karin were... a thing?”

“Something like that, yeah. Naruto and I run a matchmaking service in our spare time. So, you know, if you’re interested in anyone...”



It was funny that, at that moment, Sasuke walked in the front door. He stopped when he saw everyone watching him. “What?”

Kiba glanced at Sakura and broke into a wide grin. Naruto didn’t seem to notice and said, “Where were you?”

“Out,” Sasuke said. “Working.”

“So you left Sakura-chan home alone?”

Sasuke glanced at her, then back at Naruto. “She’s a big girl. She doesn’t need a babysitter.”

“But maybe some *company*,” Naruto protested.

Sasuke raised an eyebrow. “I think she’s happy enough to be alone,” he said, already walking off toward his room.

“Sasuke!” Naruto called, but Sasuke ignored him.

When his door shut, Kiba spoke.

“Sorry, he’s beyond even us.”

Somehow, everyone decided that Sakura liked Sasuke before even *she* decided she did.

“It’s okay, he’s cute,” Ino said matter-of-factly as she painted her nails ruby red. “You should ask him out.”

“Or not,” Sakura said, filling out a crossword. The two of them sat alone in the kitchen with a bowl of popcorn between them. It was early evening, Sakura had been living with them for two weeks, and no one else was home aside from them and Sasuke, still hiding in his room.

“Are you shy? I can do it for you. Sasuke!”

“Ino!”

“It’s alright, it’s cool,” Ino said, and turned in her seat just as Sasuke appeared in the doorway.

“What?”

“Sakura wants to know if you like her.”

“Ino!”

“...”

“Well, fine,” Ino admitted, “*I* want to know if you like her.”



Sasuke blew out a breath and looked at Sakura. She turned back to her crossword, cheeks flaming.

“Well? Will you go out with her?”

Sasuke frowned at Ino. “Maybe when the room gets empty.”

“My toenails are wet,” she said. “I can’t go anywhere. Sorry!”

Sasuke stared at her for a moment. Then, he turned around and left.

“Ugh, no manners. Why do you like him anyway?”

“...Ino, you’re such an *idiot*.”

Kiba was into it, too.

“Well? Go out with her!” he said to Sasuke one night when everyone was gathered around on the couches in the family room. Sakura sat on the edge of one couch, while Sasuke lay at the other end.

“Kiba!” Sakura exclaimed. “Would you guys shut up?”

Ino paused the movie they were watching. “So, Sasuke? Yes or no?”

“Pick yes, pick yes!” Naruto said.

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru muttered, and buried his face in a cushion.

“Maybe when I’m not so tired,” was all Sasuke said, and then he left the room.

“That was practically a yes,” Ino said once he was gone.

“Why is he so *stubborn*,” Naruto said irritably. “He *can’t* still be hung-up on Karin. He wasn’t even that into her.”

“What happened to them?” Sakura asked.

“Nothing,” Kiba said. “That’s just it. Karin was into him, so they started dating. He wasn’t into it, so she eventually just gave up. She moved out the next day.”

“Sasuke and Karin came here together,” Ino added. “This house is theirs. I guess he misses her, even if it isn’t *that way*.”

Sakura chewed on a hangnail and wondered if that was really the case.

Sakura finally asked Sasuke herself. Or, rather, tried to.

“Sasuke,” she began.

He cut her off before she could continue. “Maybe when your hair gets darker,” he said.



Sakura went out that afternoon and bought red dye.

"Oh my God." Ino was horrified. "What did you do to your hair?"

Sakura touched the freshly-colored locks worriedly. "No good?"

"You look like a cheap imitation of Karin," Ino said bluntly, getting up from the couch and walking over to Sakura to examine her more closely. "You dyed it yourself?"

"Uh-huh." Sakura was really nervous now.

"Have you ever dyed your own hair before?"

"..."

"Yeah, didn't think so." Ino sighed. "What am I going to do with you? Okay, well, it's heavier on the bottom, so we'll wash out the dye, and then I'll cut the rest for you." Sakura drew backing, holding one hand over her scalp protectively, and Ino laughed. "Trust me. I'm good with hair. I did mine and all my friends' before prom."

Unlike Sakura, who had left after her senior year, Ino had run away midway into her first term in college. Naruto had been running away from various foster homes since he was orphaned at twelve. The others were so secretive; Sakura didn't know what their stories were. She and Ino were surprisingly close after only three weeks, and Naruto was so open and friendly. Sakura didn't even miss home anymore. Or so she told herself.

"I didn't go to my prom," Sakura said.

"Why not?"

"My dad had a business party. I had to go with my family."

"Ew. Why?"

"To meet my future fiancé."

Silence fell. Ino looked shocked.

"What?"

"How old are you, eighteen?" Kiba demanded. When Sakura nodded, he said, "Why are you already engaged?"

"I'm not engaged yet. But I probably will be."

"Why?"

Sakura shrugged. "It's what my parents want. The guy's dad is a good business partner of my dad's." Ino still looked horrified, so she added, "It isn't a big deal. He's a nice guy. I've never really been interested in anyone else, anyway."

"But what about *Sasuke*?"



Sakura flushed and glanced quickly at Sasuke. He was leaning against the back of a couch, watching her silently.

“Don’t be silly, Ino,” Sakura said.

Naruto wanted to have a prom.

“I didn’t go to mine,” he told Sakura, splitting a chocolate-chip cookie in two and handing one to her, “I didn’t want to be alone. But all my friends are here.”

“Okay,” she agreed, pouring them each a glass of milk. “That might be fun.”

“I was prom queen,” Ino told Sakura matter-of-factly. “I hated the king, though, so it sucked.” She picked up a comb and ran it through a section of Sakura’s hair, then reached for the scissors.

“Who was the king?” Sakura asked, wishing she had a mirror to see what Ino was doing. *Snip-snip* went the scissors, dropping locks of her hair to the ground. The red was nearly gone by now.

“A total creeper named Sai. He was such a faker. Hate,” Ino said. “And ew, Sakura, never dye your hair again. Not even for Sasuke.”

Sakura burned red. “I didn’t—”

“Please.” Ino snorted. “We all know it. Even he knows it. Don’t you, Sasuke?”

Sakura was confused for a moment, until Sasuke’s voice sounded from somewhere behind her. “I know it,” he said, and Sakura jumped, spinning around in her seat to face him.

“Sakura!” Ino shrieked. She had leapt back and was holding the scissors close to her chest. “Don’t *do* that,” she admonished, “You could’ve gotten hurt.”

“Sorry,” Sakura heard herself say. She was still staring at Sasuke, who was standing in the doorway, newspaper in hand. He had probably bought it while grocery shopping that morning.

“I bought your ice cream,” he said to Ino, “but Naruto and Kiba are finishing it right now.”

“What!” Ino spun towards the door. “I’ll be right back, Sakura,” she added over her shoulder, and with a threatening *snip* of her scissors, she disappeared.

“Are you hungry? Naruto’s making ramen,” Sasuke said. At Sakura’s expression, he smirked.

“Dessert before lunch?”

“That’s Naruto.”



Silence fell, and Sasuke unfolded his newspaper. Sakura fidgeted uncomfortably, then turned around once more in her chair.

After a moment, footsteps drew near. The newspaper crinkled by her ear, and Sasuke spoke.

“You’re in here.”

“What?” She turned, and he handed her the paper, pointing to a small article, only a paragraph long, on the first page.

“Your parents are looking for you. They’re offering a reward.”

“Fifty thousand dollars? That’s all I’m worth?” Sakura swallowed, pasted on a smile, and handed the paper back to him. “Are you going to turn me in?”

Sasuke shook his head a little, one corner of his mouth turned up in a half-smile. “Ino’s coming back,” he said, and Sakura heard her muttering to herself as she drew closer to their bedroom.

“Oh, yeah, she’s—”

Sasuke leaned forward before Sakura could finish, and covered her lips with his own. The kiss lasted only a second, but she felt it down to her toes, and when Sasuke pulled away, she was breathing roughly, eyes wide.

“I like your hair,” he said.

And then he was gone.

“Ino?”

“Hmm?”

“Make me look... princess-y.”

“Oh, Sakura. You’re adorable. I’ll make you a *queen*.”

“Where did you get that dress?”

“Hmm?”

Sasuke gestured to Sakura’s pale green, satin gown. “You didn’t bring that with you, did you?”

Sakura laughed. “No. Ino bought it from a friend who graduated from high school years ago. It was a little worn, but she patched it up, and added some extras.” She stood up from her chair and twirled a bit, so her skirt flared out. There was a jingling noise, and she lifted her skirt a few inches so he could see the tiny bells sewn onto the hem. “Like these.”



“Ah.” He set down a cocktail, light on the alcohol, on the white cloth-covered table in front of her. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She took a sip, then sighed, slumping forward, elbows on the table. “This is really nice.”

“Yeah.” He stared around the yard. Twinkling lights decorated the trees around them. Tables and chairs were littered around one end, and the other end had been cleared for a makeshift dance floor. Guests had only just begun to arrive, but Ino was already bounding along to the thumping pop music, barefoot and laughing.

Sakura followed his gaze. “She’s going to hurt herself,” she said, and started to get up.

“She doesn’t care,” Sasuke said. “Stay.”

Sakura blinked, taken aback, and stared at him for a moment. Sasuke pretended to not notice. Then, she smiled.

“Okay. Okay, I’ll stay.”

At the end of the night, Ino gathered everyone onto the dance floor. There weren’t many people, just close friends, plus the six inhabitants and Naruto’s date (a girl named Hinata), as well as Kiba’s (Ino’s friend Temari), but it was enough to fill the small backyard.

Ino stood on a table and shouted for everyone’s attention.

“A prom isn’t complete,” she said, “without a Queen.” She leaned down, and Sakura, standing on the edge of the crowd with Sasuke, could see Shikamaru, looking bored, hand her a small silver-gray disc-like object.

“And presenting *our* Prom Queen—”

“Aren’t we supposed to vote?” Kiba called up to her.

“You get no say,” Ino said cheerfully. “This isn’t a democracy. It’s *my* choice, and *my* best friend—Haruno Sakura!”

The crowd burst into cheers, though no one looked very surprised. They glanced back at Sakura, who was still standing, frozen, behind the crowd.

“That would be you,” Sasuke whispered, nudging her softly in the side. She turned to look at him, and he tilted his head towards Ino, still standing on the table, waving wildly for her. “Go.”

Sakura went.

“What, no King?” Kiba called out.



“You stay quiet. This is a queendom,” Ino snapped at him, as Shikamaru offered Sakura a boost up onto the table. Ino clutched her arm as she came up beside her, and Sakura was glad for the support on the wobbly plastic table.

As Ino placed the crown on Sakura’s head, she caught Sasuke’s eye. He was still standing in the back of the crowd, and as she watched, he smiled at her, fully, for the first time.

She was wearing a crown of platinum-painted-plastic, cold and hard and cheap, but she looked like all her dreams had come true. Sasuke lifted his hands in a slow, ironic clap he knew she could pinpoint, and when she looked at him, her smile transformed into something more special, so that even with her fake crown, she looked like a princess.

But then, she was always meant to be one.

“So, at *this* prom, the Prom Queen dances with whoever she wants,” Ino said. “So, Sasuke, come here!”

“Ino,” Sakura hissed over the laughter from the crowd.

“What?”

Sasuke was already moving through the crowd for Sakura, and they parted to let him through. Shikamaru reached up to forcibly pull Sakura off the table, and she hit the ground just as Sasuke appeared before her.

“This wasn’t my idea,” she said, trying to step back. He reached out to grab her before she could.

“It’s okay,” he said, and pulled her closer.

Soft strains of a slow song, all piano trills and crooning lyrics started up, and Sasuke took Sakura into his arms. The other guests soon either followed their lead or headed for the snacks. Sakura could feel some of them watching her. But she only registered these things in the back of her mind; the rest of her focus was on Sasuke.

They moved in silence for a while.

“I never thought you’d last,” Sasuke said suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Here,” he said. “As a runaway. You’re too...”

“I’m too...?” Sakura echoed, voice pinching with worry. She had a feeling she wouldn’t like what was to come.



“You tell me. Why do you watch us instead of joining in? Why do you read textbooks when you’re done with school? Why do you have a picture of your family in your room when you’ve already left them?”

“I...” Sakura was at a loss for words. “Um, I—”

“Tell me,” he said, voice and gaze growing soft again. “Tell me why you just don’t fit in... and how you’re going to be something.”

Sakura felt sick at those words, and she wasn’t sure why. “Sasuke, what—”

“I’m sorry.”

Sasuke slipped away from Sakura, just as a voice sounded by her ear.

“Sakura-san. It’s time to go home.”

She barely registered the disastrous end to the prom. She didn’t remember the way the guests watched her go, the way Ino shrieked for Sakura to *please, stop!* Or the way she was ushered, unceremoniously, into a car, the way her suitcase was packed by other people and lifted into the trunk. She could only watch as she was dragged away from the house with its rust-red door where she had been so happy.

She realized, somewhere in the back of her mind, that she had dropped her fake crown.

And then, she started to cry.

Sakura lived in a large, two-story house, with a BMW and a Mercedes in the driveway and a nicely manicured front lawn with a pond.

Sasuke didn’t know how he would call her out without alerting her parents. He didn’t have her number. Then, he decided it didn’t matter and knocked on the door.

A woman who looked like her mother answered. She frowned at Sasuke’s shabby clothes.

“Yes?”

“Is Sakura here?”

“Why?” she asked cautiously.

“She left something behind. I’m just here to give it back to her.”

That was when Mrs. Haruno caught sight of the tiara in Sasuke’s head. “Oh, well,” she said, “I don’t think Sakura needs that, so—”

“Mom!” The door opened further and then Sakura was standing there, dressed in a clearly new pink summer dress. “Sasuke?”



Mrs. Haruno rolled her eyes. “Sakura—”

“Just let me talk to him, okay?” Sakura said, without looking away from Sasuke. “Besides, you owe him, don’t you?”

Her mother looked from Sakura to Sasuke and back again. Then, she stepped back. “Okay,” she said. “But don’t be long. And remember: I’m watching.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sakura said, stepping over the threshold and shutting the door on her mother’s scowl.

They stood in the chilly night air for a long moment. Sasuke was still in his suit from their “prom.”

“What do you want?” Sakura said coldly. “You already chased me off. I know you called my parents. Did you want money so badly?”

“Yes,” Sasuke said. Sakura’s eyes widened. “But more than that, I wanted you to be home again. You weren’t happy.”

“I *was* happy!”

“I *heard* you crying at night,” he hissed. “I saw the picture on your night table and the way you lived out of a suitcase. You never unpacked. You never planned to stay.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you’re *not Karin*.”

Sakura stared at him. “What?”

“Karin could have lived with me and gone nowhere in life. She was happy to. *I* made her leave. Just like I’m making you leave now.”

“But *why*?”

“Because you’re meant for a lot more. Come find me when you’re done with school. I’m not going anywhere.” He held out her crown. She stared down at it, lower lip trembling.

“You broke my heart, Sasuke. You were my *first* real heartbreak. Those hurt.”

“And I’d do it over again. As long as you *stay*,” he said gently, setting the crown carefully on her head.

“Why’d you come here?” she asked, bringing a hand up to touch the crown. “Just to bring me this?”

“Your glass slipper,” he said.

Sakura snorted. “*Why*, Sasuke?”



“I thought I should explain. And... because you wanted someone to. You wanted *me* to.”

“That’s dumb.”

“That’s *you*. You’re a dreamer.” She glared at him, and he added, softly, “That’s not a bad thing.”

“I think it is,” she snapped. “Leave me alone, Sasuke.” Then, before he could stop her, she ripped the crown off her head, tossed it to the ground, slipped back in her house, and slammed the door behind her.

Sasuke waited, staring hard at the door. Minutes passed.

And then the door opened again.

“Why haven’t you left yet?” Sakura said in a small voice. “*Leave*.”

“Maybe when I’m done with thinking,” Sasuke said.

Sakura sniffed, stepping out once more, so close that they were standing toe-to-toe. “You were right,” she mumbled. Sasuke stayed silent, and she continued: “I wasn’t happy. Not really. I couldn’t stay there.”

“I know.”

“But I *wanted* to. I wanted to be on my own.” She paused. “That house... it was too small. Too disorganized. But it felt like... like when the walls were smaller, there was more space. To just breathe. You know?”

“I know.”

She stared up at him. “You’ll wait for me? You promise?”

Sasuke bent down to scoop up the crown at his feet and set it on her head once more.

“I’ll wait.”

Reckless

Sasuke was going to die.





Worse than die, really, but it was all the same. He would cease to exist—he would be brain-dead, gone as a person, while his body would be just his body, a shell, a common statistic, another number to the unfortunate masses. *He* would be gone, replaced by a soulless instinct that wouldn't recognize any faces or voices or memories. A thing, a craving, too crude and primitive to even be called an animal. There were a lot of names for what he was going to become, but now, none seemed appropriate. Nothing fit the solid block of fear in his gut or the unwavering lack of hope. There was nothing to be done. Simple as that. He knew this and had made his reluctant peace with it, or as close as he could come to peace.

Over a decade of fighting, surviving, and now his skill, or maybe his luck, had finally run out.

His watch glowed midnight by the time his fatigue became too much. Collapsing against the side of a brick building, Sasuke slid down to the pavement, still clutching his left arm. Beneath his fingerless gloves, blood continued to ooze from his torn bicep; he hadn't bothered looking at it lately, but his last glance had revealed a light green tint around the deep teeth marks. If he'd had any doubt, it would have died there.

He leaned back and stared blankly skyward, forcing his breath to remain even and his expression controlled, but then another shot of pain bolted up to his shoulder and he cringed. Something sour in the back of his mouth made his chest tighten in a retch, which he covered by hissing through his teeth as he nearly doubled over.



A decade, and this was how his end had found him. He was going to waste away, alone, in some dark street—what street, he didn't know. Nothing looked the same anymore.—littered with empty apartments and abandoned vehicles and the decaying, forgotten bodies he would soon be a part of. He estimated he had no more than an hour left. The bastard had missed puncturing an artery, which could have killed Sasuke in only minutes if the loss of blood hadn't first, but this drawn-out process of waiting may have been worse.

As the pain alleviated to something near tolerable, Sasuke relaxed again. This was ironically fitting. After burning all of his bridges like he had, what more could he expect than to rot away by himself? His dry lips twitched toward a frown.

On the edge of his empty gaze, a flash of friendly silver caught the moonlight. Slowly, he looked over to stare down at the glinting end of the revolver in his leg holster. It seemed to stare back, and after a long half a minute Sasuke released his arm and drew it, raising it to eye level. Three bullets remained in the six-count chamber, the last one used to blow the brains out of his successful attacker. Not for the first time, he examined it leisurely from the thick barrel to the hammer, the trigger, and then finally the butt of the gun, the only part that showed signs of wear even after so long. Not that it was surprising. Itachi had always taken good care of what was his.

After double-checking the bullet count, Sasuke turned the magnum about until he was looking down the black shadow of its mouth.

Rule one: there is no room for mistakes.

Cold sweat ran down his neck as his stomach lurched. The telltale chills were setting in. The fever would soon follow.

Rule two: shoot them in the head. Attacks anywhere else are useless.

His thumb traced the frame around the trigger. How many had he killed with this one gun alone? Hundreds, he was sure.

Only by destroying their brains can you truly kill the undead.

Sasuke continued to stare at the gun, unmoved except for his light shivers—and then he thrust it forcefully back into its holster, the motion almost angry.

And lastly: if you have to die, die with dignity. That one wasn't in handbooks, but it was an understanding—it had been—in his family's branch of the B.C.F. While it was rarely spoken, never given a number, and lacked a real explanation, anyone with the name Uchiha who had fought for his country understood the creed.

Just as quickly, his jaw stiffly set, Sasuke withdrew the nine-millimeter below the revolver, clicked off the safety, turned it towards him, and pressed the barrel tip against his forehead before he could think twice. He stopped breathing, the cold metal painfully frigid against his hot skin, but his finger hesitated against the trigger.

I have too much to do.



His heartbeat grew to a thunder, making his wound pulse harder. Fresh blood brimmed along the gashes. Laboriously, finally, his breath left him in what was almost a sigh and his grip tightened.

I'm sorry, Brother... I couldn't live like you wanted me to.

His hand tensed—in an instant he saw his life flash before his closed eyes, everyone he had let down and would let down, his regrets, his choices (those last two closely intertwined), the smoldering remains of his home, the friends he still had after everything—

— Kakashi —

— Naruto —

— Sakura —

Footsteps. The sound of slow shoes on asphalt brought everything to a screeching stop. Sasuke abruptly released the trigger he had only pulled back a couple millimeters and snapped to attention, trained instinct—but probably if not mostly the desire to live for even a few more seconds—overriding his dilemma and redirecting the gun to his left, towards the approaching noise. He'd at least take one more out.

A burnt-out police car sat in the middle of the street yards away; through its tinted windows he caught a glimpse of movement and a humanoid shadow. The stride wasn't the usual, slow shuffling, but some were faster than others, he well knew, and this was close enough. His mental crosshairs followed the figure around to the car's front, his gun primed for a single, devastating headshot, and immediately honed in on the face, once visible—

And then he started, stared, and for an instant wondered if the virus was already causing him to hallucinate. There was no decomposing, lumbering form coming to greet him, but a very human, very uninfected, very *familiar* face that he hadn't really expected to see ever again, let alone here, and the surprise shook him enough to briefly make him forget everything else.

“...S-Sasuke?”

Sakura lowered her handgun just a second before he did the same, looking equally stunned. Her steps slowed, stopped, and then continued again, breaking into a run as she hurried over, and immediately Sasuke wished that it wasn't *her*, of all people, who had found him here like this, and he suddenly hoped that she was an illusion of his sick mind, after all. No such luck was present, and the relieved smile that covered her face was just an additional kick while he was down.

“Sasuke—what are you—?” She dropped beside him and he averted his gaze as she began to look him over. She quickly fell silent, her anxious air dying as she caught either his cold demeanor or sight of his injury. “...Your arm,” she said finally, “—what did...”



Reluctantly, Sasuke let his expression confirm her deduction. Sakura's look melted into a blend of shock and dread, as predicted, and he turned away again. In the distance, a crow broke the silence with a deep-throated caw.

Sasuke had just opened his mouth—*Go. Now. There's nothing you can do for me.*—when Sakura cut him off. “How long ago were you infected?” The solidity in her voice surprised him—he'd expected tears.

“...An hour ago, maybe.”

“No,” she said firmly, and touched his good shoulder to make him look at her. “Think. How long?”

Sasuke blinked, taken aback by her interest and unwavering look, and since he had nothing to lose, he did some quick thinking after glancing at his watch. “...About fifty minutes?” he estimated, sounding annoyed. “I don't know—”

In a blink, Sakura had pulled the medical pouch on her back around to her lap. Nearly tearing it open, she dug around inside it as he watched, and then cut him off again when he started to question. “Is that the only wound?” she asked mechanically.

“Yeah, but what—” She ignored him and lifted a small vial up to eye level, its label handwritten; apparently having found the right one, she searched again and this time drew out a thin, plastic cylinder. A second later Sasuke realized it was a syringe and she removed the cap, inserted the needle into the vial top, and took care to draw a precise amount of clear liquid into the tube before turning to him again. “What is that?” he demanded, wary despite that she was one of few people he was positive he could trust without hesitation.

“An antidote,” she answered hastily, taking his injured arm in gentle fingers.

Somewhere in the fog of his certain despair, a tentative light of hope flared. It was brief and he hardly dared to seize it, but it also distracted him for the couple seconds needed for Sakura to inject the needle just below the bite wound. Sasuke watched, hardly feeling the pinprick.

An antidote... It was impossible. Doctors and scientists had studied the virus for years in hopes of finding a vaccine, hadn't they? Had a breakthrough actually been made? He knew Sakura had been looking into it, but...

“What's the rate of success?” he asked as she tossed everything back into her bag.

“Zero if I don't do something about that injury.” She stood and offered a hand. “Can you walk?”

“Y-Yeah.” Using the building as support, Sasuke climbed about halfway to his feet before she intervened and lent a shoulder. He didn't object, but still kept as much weight as he could on his own legs.



“The safe house is a couple blocks away.” She studied his face, reading his sweat and pale skin better than his expression. “Just hold out until then, Sasuke,” she said gently, and began to walk.

Her “safe house,” Sakura was aware, was actually a tiny apartment above a fallen out diner on a street corner. Visible in two windows were her handwritten signs: “CLINIC UPSTAIRS. KNOCK THREE TIMES IN KITCHEN.” All the stairways leading to the second floor had been either barricaded or destroyed, the only way up now being a rope ladder that was lowered and raised through a hole in the kitchen ceiling. The more heavily injured could be lifted via a makeshift elevator, a four-by-five cut of corkboard attached to a couple ropes. Not the most practical layout for the homemade hospital she’d attempted to set up, but precautions were never too much.

She hadn’t had a patient in nearly a week, and her only company had been Naruto dropping in to check on her a couple days before. The town itself was entirely deserted, but she stayed on the grounds of it being a frequent stopping point for travelers. Having established it a couple years prior—and with Sasuke’s help at the time—she deemed it worth keeping, even if her visits to the area were too rare to keep the place in real shape.

Once upstairs, Sakura ushered Sasuke to a bed and retreated to the bathroom she’d converted into a supplies closet, now low on the materials she hadn’t had much of to begin with. As she gathered what she needed, her previous rush of adrenaline and authoritative field medic instinct began to recede slightly, enough for more personal thoughts to surface.

Six months. He’d been away on leave six months, unable to call or email due to that damn confidentiality rule, and only the briefest of words from Kakashi had let her know that Sasuke was still alive. *That* had been four months ago. Now, her chest was thick with suppressed emotion, because what were the *odds*—and there was still a chance he would die here if she didn’t work fast enough—Her eyes stung, happy tears and heavy tears threatening to fall, but she forced it all aside like she always did. Not now. Not yet, and not in front of him if she could help it.

Back in the main room, Sakura pulled a chair to his bedside, laid out her supplies, and then after telling him to remove the shredded remains of his shirt, retreated again to tie a surgical mask over her nose and mouth, wash her hands, and pull on a pair of latex gloves, the last of which Sasuke glanced at when she returned. “I need to remove any dead skin and clean the area to prevent a secondary infection,” she explained. “You’ll probably need stitches, too, but I won’t know until I look.” Sitting down, she set to work—resisting a sigh at the numerous bandages and (fresh) scars that covered his bruised torso—and looked over his arm as she murmured distractedly for him to relax. The wound itself wasn’t much better than she could have hoped for. His assailant had gotten a sizable bite, judging by the marks, and the sites of inoculation ran deep. There were several open lacerations, two still bleeding, and a couple inches’ worth of skin had



already begun to rot. Grey-green in color, it had split in some places and pus was present; she would have to remove it, as she'd said, but luckily it wasn't much.

"When was an antidote discovered?"

Sakura met his eyes, unable to help a small, if not self-conscious smile. "I developed it. About a month ago," she replied, wiping up the excess and dried blood around the injury. The silence that followed spoke for Sasuke's surprise, and after a moment he looked away.

"...It can't heal those already transformed, can it?" There was little hope in the question, Sakura could tell, and she frowned.

"No," she said quietly. *It can't bring back the dead.* She began filling another syringe. "It's far from perfect. It's not permanent, so you'd have to take it upon each infection." Flicking the needle with her finger, she then smiled sadly, a little apologetically, even if he couldn't see it. "I'm still working on a real vaccine."

"...It's better than nothing," he said gruffly after a few seconds. That made Sakura smile wider, knowingly, as she caught the comfort in it and took it to heart.

"I'm out of sedatives, so the most I can give you is a little painkiller," she told him, taking his arm again. "I'll work fast, but the effect probably won't last the whole time." She paused with the needle above his skin. "Ready?" Sasuke gave only a slight nod after a couple seconds, and then Sakura quickly and carefully administered the drug, opening the second box on her lap as soon as she was done.

Removing the infected skin would be the trickiest part of the procedure, but Sasuke's case was less severe than most she'd seen. First, though, came cleaning the mess from the inside out—in under a minute she was checking the depths of the many punctures, searching for any residue or debris, and after another minute she discovered the disturbing but no longer startling sight of what appeared to be a decayed human tooth deep down in his tissue and stubbornly embedded in place.

"I'm surprised," said Sakura finally, moving closer as she inserted the tips of her forceps into the wound. There was only the lightest movement of Sasuke's head and she guessed he had glanced at her in his mild way of asking, *at what?* "It's not like you to get hit like this."

"...Most do eventually."

Sakura began prying the tooth from his swollen muscle, careful to avoid further scarring. "Did something happen?" she asked, glancing up.

"No."

"...Mm." She sat up and dropped the rotten bone into a metal pan, the noisy rattle seeming to fill the room.

"...We'll find them, Sasuke," she said gently, although grimly. "They can't hide forever."



The comment didn't affect Sasuke's blank stare, unsurprisingly. He didn't appear to have heard her. Quickly dousing the scalpel in ethanol, Sakura began cutting along the present injuries to isolate the areas of dead and dying skin.

"Why are you still here?" he asked suddenly.

She shrugged lightly with one shoulder. "This place has its busy days, I guess. Besides—" Their eyes caught briefly. "Where can any of us really go anymore?"

"... You're still in the organization?" he asked doubtfully after a pause. *The organization*, as in the one they had both belonged to for most of their lives: the Allied Citizens for the Enforcement of Biological Safety—the A.C.E.B.S. Their division, specifically—the Biologics Countermeasure Force—had seen the roughest years lately, spawning more corruption, it seemed, than any other department.

"I am," she concurred, and then added, "by a thread. But you know how it is. With so few doctors and researchers still alive and even less not bribed or blackmailed, they're hesitant to send us to the frontlines." She smirked hesitantly, as if contemplating some long-kept secret. "... You were right about medicine not being your style. You'd never sit still under command."

"And you have?" he asked, skeptical.

"I never said I did," she replied lightly, taking her turn to ignore him when he glanced over. "But Naruto's more disobedient than you are lately," she went on, and huffed slightly. "These days he just seems to show up when he feels like it. Never really takes assignments as much as he moves on his own. If you're heading back to HQ, you might be able to catch him. He said last week that he was taking an extermination case in Kiri."

"... That area was cleaned a while back," Sasuke said after a moment.

Cutting the last corner of a large piece of dermal tissue, Sakura also discarded it in the pan. "... There were two more terrorist attacks," she said finally, solemnly, and began on the next area after wiping her scalpel. "Captain Yamato stopped one in Tanzaku, but the outbreak in Kiri was detected too late."

"Did they catch anyone?"

"No. But I heard he's working on a lead."

He stayed silent, and she saw an irritated light in his eyes that his flat-line face didn't show. She could relate, of course; all of Squadron Seven could. Kiri was a town they had all risked their lives to disinfect—Sakura in particular. Learning that it had been hit yet again, nearly as badly as before...

"... What about that tip you received?" she inquired, trying for a brighter tone. "Was it genuine?"



“More or less.” She heard that same irritation, now in his voice. “Danzou’s men ambushed us at the final meeting point.” There was a discernable pause before the word *men*. Sakura blinked, hesitated, and looked up.

“Then...”

“The others are fine,” Sasuke told her, although his tone didn’t convey any real happiness at the fact. She nodded, partly to herself. This wasn’t the first time Danzou had escaped: all he did was run, launching attacks here and there ever since his breakout from the A.C.E.B.S. prison only two days before his scheduled execution. Half the world saw him as the bane of salvation from this apocalypse; the other half saw him as a paying client. This latter point of view was the only reason he’d eluded the B.C.F. for nearly two years. Sasuke had partly volunteered, partly been assigned to Danzou’s recovery—and being a dead-or-alive option, most of the organization simply referred to it as his assassination.

Sakura knew about the grudge between Sasuke and Danzou—there wasn’t a soul in the A.C.E.B.S. who didn’t, and new recruits usually caught wind of the stories their first day in—and for that she couldn’t help hating every time a tip or lead came in as to Danzou’s whereabouts, because Sasuke never hesitated to drop everything he was doing to pursue it. She’d lost count of how many phone calls he’d received in the middle of the night, how many times he’d upped and left her without a word of where he was going because it was *protocol* and they each had their jobs and their places and she couldn’t follow. She hated it, even if she was sure Sasuke would eventually be the one to kill Danzou, the man who needed killing—Sasuke’s obsession wasn’t like before, not exactly, but it was breaking him down nonetheless.

But he was all right for the moment, and she couldn’t be anything less than glad for that much.

“...Sasuke,” she began, but no sooner had she spoken did he suddenly jump, tense, and give a startled grunt, his arm beginning to pull instinctively away from her. Ready for it, she caught his wrist and pulled him back almost just as quickly, having made a rather accurate prediction of when the last of the drug would wear off. “We’re almost done, Sasuke, hold on—” She caught and held his hand in encouragement, feeling his cold skin even through her glove. His jaw working, Sasuke stiffly leaned back again, closing his eyes momentarily to either recover or build up tolerance or both before he shot her another look telling her to proceed. Nodding, she gave a soft “okay” and resumed, dexterous enough to work one-handed for the time being.

Sasuke’s skin grew damp with a light sweat as Sakura went on, but he fought for a neutral expression and his hand remained mostly unresponsive in hers, only twitching here and there when she made a particularly agitating cut. She now spoke to distract him as she often did with patients, just telling bits and pieces of what she and Naruto and Kakashi had been up to since his departure; while she’d never been infected herself, she was aware of the painful inflammatory response the virus caused around portals of entry. Whether her talking helped, she wasn’t sure, but Sasuke gave no sign or word that it was



making things worse, either. He only listened—and she was sure he was listening, because he reacted occasionally—with an enforced calm and blankness that she'd only seen once before.

The last incision she could make with one hand was deeper than the rest. At the bottom of its reach, Sakura heard the sheets crumple in Sasuke's free fist before his fingers abruptly tightened around hers, but she kept on working, shifting just enough to properly interlock their hands.

Twenty minutes and a dozen stitches later, she sat up with a conclusive sigh. "Done." Not her neatest work, she figured, but it was successful and would hold. The fresh gauze would stem the inevitable bleeding every couple hours, but it would need to be changed periodically until his body healed up enough. Sasuke looked more exhausted than before; he didn't look over or even move when she finished, so Sakura just went about cleaning up and storing her materials in silence.

It was after one in the morning when she sat down beside him again, rubbing her eyes and trying not to look as tired as she felt. "You can sleep here," she told him, indicating where he was as she placed a glass of water on his bedside table. He didn't respond and it was difficult to tell by his distant stare if he was more than half-conscious, but she added nonetheless, "Try not to move your arm too much. And keep as much fluid in you as you can." He made a vague sound, but that was it. Watching him, Sakura smiled a little smile and gingerly smoothed his damp hair back, just as she had so many times before, and fought the heaviness in her chest that threatened to release relieved tears now that her EMS rush and the buzz of adrenaline had faded. The two of them—no, all of them—were strangely fortunate, considering the lives they led. If Sasuke had ever once been too slow, too careless, before tonight, he would have died like the hundreds of thousands before him, but by some merciful stroke of fate, his one mistake had fallen in the best possible timeframe.

After a couple recuperative minutes, Sakura reached for the leather straps hanging along the bedside bars. "There's a low chance," she told him, "but I've observed post-treatment reactions in some victims." She stood and leaned over him, draping the first restraint over his chest and working to fasten it to the opposite side. "Just for tonight, you should—" The rest of her words left her in a startled choke, because without warning Sasuke's strong hand was around her throat. She jerked back in surprise and her star-speckled vision caught a glimpse of his expression—blank, but *blank* blank, a dead, emotionless blank that even he could never achieve consciously—and that said enough. She automatically struck at the muscle in his bicep with the side of her hand, but his brain, of course, didn't register the pain.

"Kkhaah—Sasuke—!" She already knew it was a waste of breath: he couldn't hear her. Sasuke himself was unconscious; the thing controlling him now was nothing but animalistic instinct. His other hand grasped ruthlessly at Sakura's shoulder when she resisted, scratching her skin, and knowing that she couldn't beat him in strength, she quickly planted one foot on the bedside table, another on the mattress edge, and shoved, hard, propelling herself backwards and onto the solid floor where her head bounced off



the hardwood with a searing flash of white across her vision. Sasuke landed on top of her in the same second, his knee crushing her ribs and driving tears to her eyes as his firm hold trapped the sharp breath that was forced upwards from her battered lungs. The table landed beside them with a loud crash, vials and tools and shattered glass scattering everywhere.

As rare as this side effect was, it was actually more deadly than a true transformation—the body hadn't stiffened up in that post-death period, the brain hadn't started deteriorating, which meant greater speed and muscle control than was normally found in a zombie. Sakura might have stood a chance against Sasuke if he were actually an Infected, but now she was fighting against the real thing without the advantages of conscious sympathy and pain perception.

Managing to hold his head at bay in a mutual stranglehold, she flipped rapidly through every bit of training she'd ever received—but every maneuver, every strategy she'd learned called for disabling her attacker in the only way fitting: cranial obliteration.

Her sight darkened, her head swam, her lungs burned, and her muscles ached. Less than a minute had passed, but that was enough. If she did lose consciousness, there was the possibility of surviving as long as he didn't tear her throat out, but even then she might not wake before the virus made its rounds—

No. If she had enough time to consider death and reanimation, she still had a chance. Turning her neck with difficulty, Sakura searched the debris along the floor—and then her heart gave a painful leap when she caught a flash of silver. One of the vials of vaccine was just out of reach.

Sasuke was still struggling against her, to get his mouth to her, and as he fought, his knee suddenly slipped off of her chest and he staggered a little. She acted, twisting her hips and kicking against his to send him all the way off and down and then driving all of her weight into his forearm—his fingers lost some hold, she struck again a second later, and then her bruised throat was free. She turned, darted for the vial—caught it, and then scrambled to her feet and to the trash bin beside the bed. Against all engrained training and principles, Sakura reached in and snatched the syringe she'd used on Sasuke, thrusting the contaminated needle into the bottle top and drawing the liquid up as slow as she dared.

No matter how many times she'd seen him move, Sasuke always seemed to be faster than the last time. He lunged at her some several seconds before she had guessed he could and she jumped back, but she hit the overturned table and fell and he was on her again almost before she could comprehend it. She threw an arm up and across his collar to keep him back as she brought the syringe up to her teeth and bit down on the piston to pull it from the bottle. Flipping it around in her hand, she reached up and around him in an opening between his movements, stabbing the back of his neck as soon as she saw the chance.

For a few tense seconds, nothing happened and Sasuke nearly broke the needle as he continued thrashing at her—but then he slowed, stopped, and a distinctly humane



look came back into his eyes, distant though they were. His tight hold on her shoulders slackened, he swayed, and Sakura caught him with an arm and a leg to keep him on top of her as he abruptly collapsed.

After easing the needle from his skin, she relaxed with an exhausted groan against his shoulder. She'd only seen this case in less than six percent of patients, but even the first time hadn't been as... *savage* as this. She slowly raised her hands and moved them over his back, holding him tightly, protectively, even as her right arm throbbed and she felt the trickle of blood.

Sakura let a couple minutes pass before moving, putting him back into the bed with some difficulty, administering the vaccine to herself from a fresh aliquot, and cleaning up the mess their struggle had made. Once all was said and done, she turned off the last light and sat beside Sasuke on the bed, watching silently; a moment more and she lied down behind him, scooting closer and examining his sides and chest. She would check and change those bandages tomorrow, she noted. He probably needed *more* stitches, knowing him.

She stayed with him, her justification being that a secondary reaction wasn't possible for a number of reasons, but aside from being a comfort to herself, it was the most she could do for him as he was.

A sharp prickle in his arm stirred Sasuke out of the last of his sleep. Even closed, his eyes burned under sunlight, telling him it was morning and forcing him to blindly demand in a mumble what Sakura was doing. "Shh," she replied. "Just taking a blood sample." He slung his free arm over his eyes and began the slow process of trying to wake, hinging his focus on her words to keep from going back under. "If it comes back clean, you've got nothing to worry about."

He heard her stand and move away, and then the scrape of chair legs as she took a seat at one of the tables. "If it doesn't?" he asked, wincing as he pulled his arm from his face.

"Well..." *Click*; a machine hummed. "That hasn't happened yet." They both left it at that.

Once Sasuke could see clearly and sleep no longer tugged at him, he glanced first at his left shoulder—still bandaged, but a spot of browned blood had appeared—and then over at Sakura. He saw that aside from a couple beds, chairs, and a worn couch, most of the "furniture" in the room consisted of crates pushed together and covered with tattered notebooks, stained texts, and different equipment and medical supplies. There was only one real desk, and Sakura now went between a microscope on top of it and some papers on one of the boxes. After some half a minute at the former, she caught his stare as she drew back from the eyepieces—and smiled.

"Negative," she announced, and the last of that knot in his gut faded. He closed his eyes and exhaled, a little heavier than usual.



“So?” she pressed, approaching a minute later, and he saw her smirking confidently as she set a first aid kit on the bed beside him. It struck him as odd that she wore a turtle-necked sweater in this heat, but he only closed his fingers over hers when she took his hand. That melted Sakura into a warmer expression and she leaned over, looking momentarily into his eyes before kissing him gently and briefly once, and then again, slower. “I missed you,” she told him, nuzzling his cheek. Sasuke brushed her hair back from her face and nudged her up for another kiss, deep and long and with a nip of his teeth at the end that made her grin. “...I still want a real *thank you*.” He snorted lightly, and then shifted to slip his knee between her legs and pull her up onto the bed with him. She followed along, but only to straddle his stomach as she pulled back. “That doesn’t count, either.”

Running her hands over his chest, Sakura examined his covered wounds, a frown twisting her lips each time she pulled away the gauze. “Did you wrap these yourself?”

“Most of them.”

She peeled back one corner and started. “When were you *shot*?”

“...It wasn’t even close,” Sasuke pointed out, glancing aside. “And Karin took care of it at the—” Sakura ripped it off in one swift motion. The sting of the tape pulling at his skin shut him up and he chose not to oppose as she began cleaning the stitches.

She remained on top of him as she worked, cleaning and redressing each injury. Sasuke just watched her—her movements and her flickering expressions, her eyes for a while before he looked back to the ceiling. Once finished around a quarter of an hour later, she sighed, wiping her hands with a cloth. “I’m surprised you haven’t just died of a regular infection. Or *tetanus*.” She slid partway off to stretch out beside him, avoiding his freshly dressed injuries, and then leaned over him with a searching look. He returned it, silent, but then she just rested her head against his, kissing the corner of his mouth softly. That *look* said enough: he knew she’d been worried sick since the night he’d left—the night he’d awoken to a brief call, a summoning to the lead conference room for his next mission briefing; it had required leaving then and there, and the last thing he’d said to her was a short “The front desk called. This one’ll probably take a while.” A kiss in the dark, a word from her to be careful, and that was the last they’d seen of each other until last night.

Turning his head, Sasuke kissed her again, not entirely drawing back when it ended; Sakura murmured his name or some other nothing and did the same, a little deeper, making an amused, pleased sound when he moved just right, and then she laughed quietly when he pulled her down further and kissed her more fully. She ran her hands gently over his chest as he settled his on her back; he kissed her top lip, felt her warm breath against his ear when he kissed across her cheek, down to her jaw, the beginning of her neck—but as he went to smooth her collar down out of the way, Sakura retreated with a smile. “No strenuous activity for at least another day.”



Sasuke watched her, but the look stayed and he knew she was serious. Relaxing again, he glanced around the room. "...People still show up here?"

"The most I've had is... ten in one week," she told him, settling next to him again. "But lately it's just been a couple." His eyes returned to her, to her at ease expression, and inwardly he frowned. He didn't like her being so far out here, even if she could handle herself and had been placed here for that very reason. If he'd been in town at the time of her relocation, none of the higher-ups would have crossed him on that call—if they would have even tried to move her while he was there in the first place.

"...I'm due back at headquarters in three days." Sasuke glanced again over her features as he spoke. "Come with me." Anyone who had a problem with it could take it up with him.

Sakura smiled again, and hesitated as she tugged lightly at his neckline. "...I'll be okay," she said after a moment. "I've already promised Dr. Tsunade that I'd meet up with her this weekend. We're headed up north to some of the towns along the coast." She touched his face, rubbing his cheek with her thumb. "Until the vaccine is put into production... I want to try and save as many as I can. Why don't you come along?" she threw in brightly, but Sasuke detected little hope in the question. She knew as well as he did that he wouldn't let any chance go—at information, at a mission that he had a personal stake in—if he could help it.

Appearing to sense his answer, Sakura smiled anyway and ran her soft knuckles back over the top of his cheekbone. "...If you're due back in three days," she murmured, "...then stay for two."

Sasuke held the warm, inviting look, and when she finally broke it to lie against him, her head resting in the crook of his neck, he felt the most content that he had in months. Even the few successes his team had had during the mission had been hollow, just routine killings and cleansings rather than victories. That was the odd thing: he knew doing what he did, obsessing like he did, would mean little in terms of his own happiness in the end. Vengeance was an empty word, but that made him no less attached to it. Achieving his goal and finding it less satisfying than hoped for was always more appealing than failing, or never knowing for sure. Doing this would get him a lot closer to something like inner peace than walking away ever would.

But it wasn't just for himself. It wasn't just for the dead. Not anymore.

He let his hand come to rest on Sakura's hip as he went on staring upward.

"Here." Sasuke looked up as he tugged on his gloves, curious to find Sakura holding a shotgun out towards him with both hands. "I noticed you lost yours." He glanced at it.

"What about you?" he asked flatly.



“I have another one,” she breezed, all but pushing it into his hands, but his look remained skeptical. She caught it and sighed. “I *do*.” Stepping over to the trunk against the far wall, she reached in and picked up another, older model before setting it back and closing the lid. Pacified, Sasuke studied the gun she’d given him—newer than hers, two-barrel, pump-action. Slightly heavier and noticeably thicker than his previous one. As he worked to strap it across his back, Sakura stepped around and helped; once done, she kept a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to find her face solemn. “...Wait for me,” she said, soft but firm. “We’ll be back in two weeks. If something comes up, call me—I’ll come back if you need to leave—”

“I’ll be fine,” he interrupted, and she stared at him a little longer before nodding. “I need to talk to Kakashi, anyway,” he added after a few seconds. “Finding him should take me a while in itself.” Sakura nodded again, but seemed genuinely more reassured by that. She kept her hands on his shoulders, his chest, as if still hesitating about her decision to let him travel alone—and then finally she drew back to retrieve a small box off of the nearby table.

“Just in case... take this.” She removed the top and he saw three brown vials along with some short, wrapped syringes and a folded note beneath them. “If you get infected again, you’ll need to inject this within the same hour, no more than six inches away from the wound site.” Sakura closed it again and looked up. “You wouldn’t be able to determine the exact amount, so to be safe, I’ve written down how much you should do regardless. Since it’ll be a slight overdose, make sure you’re somewhere you can afford to rest for a while in case you get dizzy or pass out.” Sasuke took the box—slightly smaller than his hand and weighing almost nothing—and carefully tucked it into the highest pouch on his leg, which he predicted would take the least amount of impact, if any. “...This doesn’t mean you can be more reckless,” Sakura added.

“It was a one-time mistake.”

“But it was enough.” She searched his eyes, and then took his face in her hands and just held him there. “...Be careful, Sasuke.”

After returning the kiss she gave, he shifted, disgruntled. “You’ll only be a danger to yourself and Tsunade if you worry. I’ll be fine,” he repeated. It sounded harsh, but Sakura recognized the layered concern as only she would and gave a soft word of consent.

She walked with him as far as the street out front. The sun was still rising ahead of them, the city empty and silent in a false sense of peace and security. Sasuke hesitated as he turned west, and then felt Sakura against his back, her forehead on his shoulder.

“Don’t wander around at night anymore without backup,” he told her firmly. “You know that.”

“...You’re not my superior anymore. Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I shouldn’t have to tell you something so basic in the first place.”



Sakura scoffed as she linked her fingers with his. He gripped back slightly, and then after another moment pulled away, not releasing until he had to and not looking back.

A few yards later, he slowed, stopped, and turned partway back, but only to exchange with her the inevitable pair of looks that those in the A.C.E.B.S. usually did at the start of a mission: *Don't die. Remember your training.*

On a yearly average, roughly twenty-five percent of B.C.F. soldiers were lost during combat with the enemy. Of that number, an estimated seventy percent joined the undead ranks.

Sasuke's cool expression never moved, but his eyes, hard by default, softened the longer they watched her. When at last he turned to leave, the motion was slow, and he waited a second more before taking a departing step.

Scratch

I

She

I





The café she was sitting in was located in the northern half of the city—appropriate, she thought, considering the symbolism there. The North was cold enough that time seemed to freeze and stop entirely, leaving nothing left but Possibility.

It was April, and the winds were changing.



She brought the café au lait to her lips, touched with only the barest hint of cream—a concession to the one addiction she had yet to live down. It was still a bit bitter, but she ignored that, and shifted the sunglasses on her face so they covered more of her eyes.

It was a dry day, and the sky was fickle—unwilling to turn blue, alternating between off-white and somber gray.

It was April, and he was late.

The orders had come some months ago—Sakura wasn't so sure about Time anymore—enclosed in a manila envelope with red tape across the front. Along with the aged scroll inside—Tsunade had always been one for special effects—there had been a white envelope with fifty thousand euro, three silver keys, and one note on rose-scented paper with an address in red scrawl.

Arrondissement 4

Île Saint-Louis

For a moment she'd balked. This was war, and she could not, would not, walk out on the people who needed her care.

She'd said as much to her mentor the last time they'd spoken, had screamed so loud it hurt, but Tsunade was unmoved.

"There's nothing left," she'd said, her face grim with unforgiving resolution. "And, I don't need you anymore."

"But they—"

"They are dead, Sakura. And I made one of them a promise before he left. Naruto made me—"

"Don't! Don't talk to me about—"

"Naruto made me promise that you wouldn't die here, Sakura. And, I—I have to—"

"What?" Sakura interrupted, her voice wavering in her anger. In times of crisis, Tsunade had told her once, Sakura was not, could not be steel—she'd tried before, but the comparison was too solid, and Sakura, strong as she was, could not stay that way for long.

"You have to what?" she continued. "He was your heir—I get that. I get that he had to see the ground from underneath it before you did, and that waking up knowing



he's gone and you're still here makes you...I get that. But he's dead now, and you have me. I'm here. I'm alive. Would you value a corpse over the welfare of all those people who are still fighting for you," she spat out, imbuing the words with as much vitriol as she could gather. "Dead men don't care about promises anymore, and people—your people—still need me here."

It was difficult, but Tsunade had reined her temper back, Sakura remembered. Then, she had not the luxury of falling to pieces. That Luxury was gone—had left without warning in the stillness of a night that still haunted her.

She'd watched as Tsunade had shaken off the brief pangs of Memory—those, she knew, were Luxury, too.

"There's nothing left for you here—"

"But, I can help," she'd said fitfully. "I can help him, that man whose name you still can't say, the one you still blame for all this."

"And, why shouldn't I? Give me one reason I shouldn't lay the credit for all this at his feet," Tsunade had said, her voice tight with restrained rage, her arms spread out, directing her attention to the panoramic view of the outside, to the epithets that came filtering in from the nearby battlefields. "Give me one good reason I shouldn't—and you shouldn't—hate him for betraying this."

Sakura had not been listening—in truth, had not wanted to hear.

"I need to help him, please, please, please—don't make me leave." Then, with more feeling, "You can't make me leave."

There had been silence and then—

"As I thought," Tsunade said, as though the truth of something she'd long suspected had finally been brought to light. "Listen carefully, Sakura—I am allowing you no reason to stay. Do you understand me? So, if I have to break every bit of you into small enough pieces to drag onto that airplane tomorrow, I will," she said, almost wearily. "You're leaving, Sakura. Whether you want to or not."

The blonde woman, looking far older than her forty years, sat back in her chair and sighed.

"If I were you, I'd be thankful."

What happened next was lost to her, but she remembered resisting, and she remembered bits and pieces—the sensation of her arms flailing in empty space, the feel of a sudden, swift pressure against the nylon they'd used as a gag, a blow to the base of her skull.

And then, there had been darkness.

She'd guessed long ago that they'd used her—had somehow imbued her with



the power of Forgetting. For a while she'd been thankful—not everyone had that Luxury, anymore, and there wasn't much that she wanted to remember. Certainly not the sight of her home razed to the ground until there was nothing left but foundation, and certainly not her mother, hanging from the rafter of a house left incomplete—her body swaying against a wooden skeleton, as though the gods had known what irony was after all, and wanted to remind her too.

But these, she did recall—they were personal tragedies, and she treasured them. They were, after all, what she had left of that life.

This life—this life was different. Sakura supposed that not many people remembered their birth-day, their beginning, but she did.

She'd woken up in a hospital to a world of white, her body still curled and still curved around itself under the warmth of a pink blanket. Her skin was moist with fever and the doctors—all of them—had spoken to her in a language she didn't understand. (And she wondered, for a brief moment, if hers was dead—if it was gasping for breath, for words that, now, only her lips knew how to form.)

They'd heard of her, they said—or at least, of her situation. They'd listened to the reports with clinical ears, watched as the news anchors spoke of their story with dry, reedy voices, the way they normally did when Others were the spectacle of the day. The government had established a makeshift “home” for “people like you,” they had said—“a place for you to breathe,” one of them had noted, smiling at her with white teeth. “While you get your bearings, you know? Do you think,” he said, turning now to one of his colleagues, an elderly man with a stern brow. “Do you think she understands me?”

She still did not know how she'd known how to reply, but the word came out almost reflexively, like an exhalation, like her mind had rewired itself, like the knowledge of it were something that had been ingrained all along.

“Yes.”

She'd stayed at the halfway house—

(“And why,” Sakura had asked once, “why do they call it that?”

The caretaker had given her a wry smile. “Well, you should know, shouldn't you? You're a perfect example, after all—you're halfway.”

“Halfway? Between where?”

He'd paused, his tan, weathered face crinkling into an approximation of a smile.

“Here and there, then and now—wouldn't you say?”)

She'd stayed at the halfway house for seven months, before a couple that had no children of their own (the residents of the envelope) had summarily “adopted” her—an experimental, “invitation-only” program set up by the government to allow the refugees



the possibility of acclimating to life in their new world.

The man was eccentric—his hair had been ash gray since his twenties, and he wore an eye patch. Most days, he covered the bottom half of his face with patterned silk scarves. Sakura who'd never known anyone in her old life to do the same unless they were grossly disfigured—by war, or some other malady—had asked him about it once, but he'd dismissed her with a pat on the head, and said simply that he'd made his living wearing different faces, and couldn't stand the sight of his own anymore. He lived his life with a strange sort of lethargy that bled into his movements, into his habits.

His wife was at once sprightly and neurotic—a woman who wore her worry like a terminal disease. Sakura thought her familiar, and lovely for the fact. Her wardrobe was carefully dated, her manners and air only slightly antiquated, as though she was determined to live in some not-too-distant past. Shizune was an expatriate, and on Sakura's arrival, she'd told her that she knew what it was to live halfway—"I have been doing it for fifteen years."

She lived with them as happily as she could have, and developed her own habits, her own quiet idiosyncrasies. She read novels—a practice which, she found, helped her learn the language far more than speaking to other people. She found novelty in the housework, and spent the better part of the day rearranging her socks according to first color, then length, then material. She drank her tea—the one thing then and now had in common—with lemon. There was the ever interminable sensation of waiting, but waiting for what, she did not know—did not know what it was that came next.

There had been music at the halfway house, and she'd taken to it more than the food, than the clothing, than the language. One evening, after a late lunch with Shizune—before she'd left on a trip around the world with the man Sakura still couldn't call "Father"—she'd sat in the audience of a nearby lounge and listened to the words in the songs they sang. She hoped the distinctive color of her hair and eyes would not mark her off as a foreigner, but the manager had spotted her nonetheless, and intrigued by her story—and then, when he heard it, by her voice—he'd asked her to sing for him.

"I don't know your songs," she'd replied.

"So sing your own," he'd urged her in return. "You have one—I can tell it's so, by the look of your hands. My mother told me that a woman with scars on her hands always had good stories to tell—and good stories make good songs."

She thought through what was left of her memories, and tried to remember a time for music.

II

he

II

The dreams came less frequently now, a fact for which he was almost grateful. Sasuke couldn't remember what it was to be grateful—how it felt, and how it tasted in his



mouth. Perhaps, he thought, this heavy weight he felt at waking was it, after all. He woke less frequently in the night, and slept more often in the daytime, and the respite was a blessing.

When he was awake, he lingered instead of lived—here, in the alien landscape of the new home he hadn't chosen, Sasuke knew he should have felt freer. There was no blame here, no leader he'd disappointed, no treason he'd committed. He spent most of his days in the cafés near the abandoned warehouse he'd found. He'd carved a home for himself in the listlessness of the place—felt the ghosts in it mourning like the old friends he'd left behind, felt a strange kinship to the machines, rotted with rust and age. They'd outlived their usefulness—they were obsolete.

Some nights he visited the lounges, armed with old newspapers he'd scrounged up from the newsboys. The one who sold his wares closest to the factory had become an almost friend—a waif between sexes, with doll-eyes, and a penchant for green spandex. The first time he'd seen him, Sasuke thought he was familiar for a moment, and tried to remember until the sensation of it began to burn.

(He thought maybe that they might have warned him about that, but he couldn't be sure.)

The first night he'd been at the lounge near the shopping district—the one with a foreign name, with the black leather seats, and the lamps that spread more like shadow than light—he'd been unimpressed. Not with the décor—even back where he'd come from, aesthetics had never concerned him. He'd come to forget Forgetting—this place, with its dark, dusty corners and mottled gray walls seemed to lend itself to memory.

It had been a Tuesday when he changed his mind.

The song was mournful and slow, like the look in her bright green eyes, solemn and slow, low and melancholic in a way that somehow hurt him to contemplate. He was reminded, somehow, of autumn-gold and falling leaves, buildings burning brightly, and clay grounds spotted with pieces of blood-rusted solver, shining under moonlight like silver teeth, and then—

Nothing.

“You must be new around here, fellow,” the man beside him said slowly, a fact that left Sasuke feeling almost grateful. He was only still getting used to the foreign sound of softly rolled r's and feather-soft f's.

“How can you tell?” Sasuke replied, haltingly. A foreign feeling to be sure—Sasuke was inexplicably certain that before—before the Forgetting—he'd never hesitated a moment in his life. His hand twitched at his side—he wondered whether it was muscle memory that had been the cause of the sudden weight against his fingers, whether it had just been yet another craving for nicotine. Sasuke found himself more disposed to the former explanation, when, without warning, first his fingers, then his hands, and then his



eyes, and then, in increments, every piece of him, was drawn to the woman on stage, as though there was a tangible connection between them, as though she'd pulled them into her, like a puppeteer, like an ocean.

As he watched, the other man smiled, but incompletely, as though his face had forgotten the motions and had settled for this half-expression.

“Well, you're looking at our girl like you've never heard anything so lovely in your life.”

“I haven't,” Sasuke replied honestly. Or maybe he had. His memory was dust now, after all; not enough left of it to form bones, and not nearly enough left to bury.

The man snorted.

“She'd get me more money if she sang something different once in a while. But the idiot girl just goes on singing the same old song—the regulars get tired after a while, you know?”

“Yes,” Sasuke said fluidly, because lying came easier to him now that he didn't know the whole of the truth anymore, and the lies seemed to come, like water, like bile. “I can see how that would be so.”

The other man responded with something inconsequential, Sasuke was sure. If it had mattered, he would, after all, have heard it.

He stayed until half-past three in the morning, waiting to catch a glimpse of the girl he didn't remember. Sasuke wanted to see what she was when she was quiet—he had the inexplicable feeling that the sensation of it, of her silence, had been a rare commodity back when he'd known her name. He couldn't yet describe what it was that made him so sure that he knew her. Perhaps he didn't—perhaps only his eyes did, only his hands did, only his fingers did.

Perhaps only his mouth knew her. He wasn't sure. Maybe it was muscle memory, the way he'd thought earlier.

From his perch on the windowsill on the second floor of the factory, Sasuke watched her as she made her way around the corner, the moonlight playing over hair like smoke, before he turned away to dream again.

On the twelfth night, she'd come in a man's shirt, and Sasuke had come with a blank piece of paper.

(“It belongs to the man I live with. He's on a trip with the woman I live with. They've gone around the world,” said Sakura, smiling cheekily before her nightly round. “They'll be back before the eighty days are up, I'm sure.”)

Nothing, said Sasuke.)



As she sang, he sat and watched her, his eyes flickering every so often to the ash of the candlewick near his right hand. Would that pass for ink, he wondered. Would he even know what, know how to write? Sasuke hadn't tried writing, yet, and before he'd seen her—this phantom in pink—he hadn't any reason to.

“You need a pen?”

He turned his head slightly to the side, just enough to see the face of the manager. In the candlelight, it was more shadow than substance, and the flame made his face look almost ghastly.

“I don't know,” Sasuke said—honestly, this time.

In the daylight, when he wasn't sleeping, Sasuke drew for his alms. He had a fair hand at portraits, and had keen eyesight for as long as he could remember—which, he admitted to himself once, didn't really say much.

Mostly, though—and he knew this for a fact—people came to him because he was beautiful.

There were two other artists beside him on the same street—in the art district, street vendors were a dime a dozen. One was blond, and missing an eye. There was a single hole, the width of a paintbrush, in the center of each of his palms, but he drew with the precision of a scientist. The leaves he captured seemed to move on the page, and the shadows he drew were almost eerily precise.

Beside him, there was a man with scars running the length of his face. The top of his head seemed to have been carved out—he looked, Sasuke thought, like one of the kappa he'd read about in the Trivia section of the newspaper a few weeks ago. Sasuke wondered if he'd been tortured, but thought it indelicate to ask. There was, after all, no telling what would offend a body.

Given the options, Sasuke wasn't much surprised that the majority of business had come his way. The women fawned over him, and many times, there had been slips of paper with hotel rooms, and house addresses, and telephone numbers—even, on one memorable occasion, a license plate number—concealed in the money they'd handed him while their husbands were looking away. He took it all with a silence that seemed to offend them far more than an outright refusal, and one-by-one, they hurried away, clutching at their indignation like coats of armor.

He wondered sometimes, why the other two painters didn't move on, but never asked. This had, after all, been their territory, far long before it had become his.

Three months went by, before he remembered her name and who she'd been to him.

Six more came before he realized that they'd given her Lethe.



The drug had been in its experimental stage when Pain had asked him to infiltrate the home he'd abandoned under the guise of surrender, in order to steal a sample. The neurological effects were unclear, and the battery of psychological tests that Konoha had run on its POWs had been anything but reassuring. All that was sure was it induced Forgetting. It was a mark of Sakura's clout with their leader that the man she loved had been allowed a job as a guard of the Research and Development section of the military base where they'd grown up, so soon after his release from house arrest. It was her reputation they'd risked, her standing among the military generals that he'd willfully sacrificed.

After he'd left—for the second time—with sample in hand, she'd been detained as an accessory to his escape, and demoted two ranks. He'd heard, soon after that Tsunade had never looked at her in the same light.

The first words he said to her were:

"I kissed you, the last time I saw you."

He said them in a mix of their old language and in the new—mostly because he'd never been good with words, and mostly because knowing two languages didn't make him any better. Knowing two, he thought, only made it easier to bungle his meaning.

In any case, she looked remarkably composed for someone who was confronted by a stranger halfway between night and morning.

"I think I've heard that one before," she said, almost courteously. Sasuke thought perhaps that she might have been tired—she'd sounded a bit peaky at her performance tonight. She paused for a moment, peering at him underneath the dusky glow of a nearby street lamp. For a brief second, Sasuke wondered if her eyes remembered him. After another moment, she sidestepped him to cross the street.

Despite himself, and despite their history, Sasuke found himself unable to control the brief curving of his lips.

It was after that encounter—the first real acknowledged encounter between their other selves—that Sasuke began having trouble with sleeping.

Instead, he drew more, and made more money—soon, after he'd outgrown the factory and what it was to him, Sasuke thought he'd leave it behind.

But nothing mattered if he couldn't sleep. Sleeping was the conduit to their lost world—the one he'd forsaken, the one she'd forgotten. He didn't know what drove him to remember, what drove him to make her remember. He thought once, that it might have been the burden of knowing he was the very last of a civilization—the last of a dying



breed.

He knew nothing but that he needed to dream again, and to dream—he needed to sleep.

III.

they

III.

In retrospect, one, or both of them thought, the problem had been this:

Sakura was too tired to remember what they'd been to each other, and Sasuke was too tired to forget.

They'd found each other in the middle of an open market. Shizune had lost track of her after a fruit vendor pushing durian and lychee had offered her samples of his wares. Sakura had allowed her feet to take her where they willed, and almost unbidden, they'd walked until they'd lost her in the midst of the crowd.

He was perusing the art stand with the intent to buy more charcoal, when he felt the sudden slight weight of her at his side. At first, she looked almost resigned to their meeting, then almost happy, and inexplicably, almost sad—anything but almost surprised.

“Oh,” she said. “It’s you.”

“It is,” he agreed solemnly.

IV.

now

IV.

The café had been his suggestion, and he apologized for his lateness.

He did not apologize for what she couldn't remember, though he told her in detail what he'd done to her. He told her of his second betrayal and then of his second return—after she'd been run to tatters, and before Tsunade had made her leave. He told her what his punishment had been—how he'd administered the Lethe to her in increments, and then, how he'd been told to turn the weapon on himself, incorrectly by design so that he would remember some, but not all of it.

There were no hysterics, no overwrought accusations. She listened with the serenity of any woman listening to an account of a past life—of a lost life, of a world at once lost and familiar. She felt the phantom pain of loss at the sound of Naruto's name, but it ached less than the more recent pain of a fall she'd taken a few hours prior, on her way down the stairs. She wondered, for a moment, whether she should have felt guilty.



It was only when he shifted tones—when he started speaking in their shared language—that she reacted.

“How do you remember?” she asked again, though he’d already explained it. She spoke for the sake of speaking, talking to him in their dead language, as she felt the sharp angles of his cheeks, the aristocratic line of his nose. She was, she thought, constructing him now—reconstructing her old, forgotten world in increments—in the same way that he’d deconstructed her memory, with only fingers as her guide. What a power it was, she thought in wonder, as her eyes fluttered shut.

“How do you remember almost everything?” she repeated.

She felt him shrug under her fingers in reply.

“My punishment,” he said simply. “My burden to bear. They did not allow me to completely forget what I’d done—at least, they did not allow me to forget the betrayal. What good there was, they took from me.”

“And then,” she continued, as she stepped back for a moment. She needed to breathe. “And then, you found me, and remembered me—am I your punishment too?”

He looked at her for a long while, considering her green eyes, her thin lips, their own shared history—even he, could not deny that now. He wondered if he wanted to.

“I don’t know, yet,” he said. A beat, and then—“Do you want to be? I’ve hurt you before, you know.”

She looked at him for a long while then. Her eyes remembered him, but her body didn’t—she would have to relearn him, this man who spoke to her in words that had long ago turned to dust.

“I—you—” she stammered—her lives with him had taught her to be unsure.

“Yes,” he said simply, making no effort to avoid her eyes. “This time, I’m giving you a choice.”

Sakura thought for a moment, about the pain she couldn’t remember and the shame he couldn’t forget. She thought about what it was they’d had before—whether it had been love then, whether it might be now. She thought that he was giving her a choice this time—this third life to live, with or without him.

She knew, with no hesitation, that if she refused him, he would leave again.

“No,” she said, in answer to her thought, in answer to his question.

Sasuke, Sakura noticed, looked mildly surprised—she felt oddly gratified, as though that might have been a small victory.

“No,” she repeated, more firmly this time. Her fingers echoed her sentiment, curling into fists at his collar, and wrinkling the fabric there.

Sasuke looked at her, thoughtfully, and then nodded.



“Again,” he asked, as though to confirm it.

This time, she did not hesitate—this time, she thought, it and they would be different.

“Again.”

The Artist

You close your eyes as you let the crescendos and the decrescendos of Beethoven’s “Appassionata” sweep over you, engulf you, hopefully consume you.

Music is supposed to help you get into the ‘mood’...

Or at least that’s what she told you.

But you think that she may have been wrong because your canvas is still as shamefully empty as it was before you played the track. And you’re worried that this might just be the first failure that you’ll encounter in your two years of art school.

Abstracts have never been your thing.

‘You let your heart guide your hand when you paint abstracts,’ she told you. ‘It’s the easiest thing in the world, there’s no pressure at all, it’s cathartic even,’ she said.

But what happens when the heart is empty?

Your eyes flutter open as the last notes of the melody die out.

Nothing. Still nothing.

Sighing, you lower your brush, still clean and still dry, and lay it on the table alongside your palette, also yet to be touched.

You have to do something, or you won’t have anything to submit.

You’ve never been one to dally. You can’t force yourself to paint—you can’t... you’ve never had to. But there’s a first time for everything—and your canvas is still white, white because it’s clean. White because it’s empty, because there’s nothing there—and you really have to do something productive, something that can help.

Something...

Reading has always helped you. Maybe, if you read about the matter, you can find out what it is that you’re doing wrong.

So you press the stop button on the ‘not-really-helpful’ CD player you borrowed, shove it into your bag, and head to the library because you’ve never been one to dally.







You see her there, sitting in her usual spot, her nose in a book and her head in the clouds. Not quite so absorbed in what she's reading, (she spots you as you approach her, a cheeky smile on the ready).

"Hey ugly," you call out. The usual greetings. The usual responses.

"Shut up Sai."

"Afraid of a little honesty, hag?"

You watch her smile disappear as her expression contorts into one of irritation. She's not ugly, not really. People say she's beautiful. Then again, you won't know. 'Beauty takes one's breath away,' according to a book you've read. If that is true, then you see beauty only when it's painted on a canvas. You don't see it in Sakura, nor do you see it in other women.

But 'ugly' infuriates her, and you like it when she's angry, because it's like a lesson on facial expressions. The downward set of her mouth, the creases on her forehead, the slight flush on her cheeks—you memorize it all for later, when you translate it to art. It's useful. You learn from her anger, so you call her ugly.

You don't push her though, because you know that she has a mean right hook. Instead, you take the player from your bag and hand it over to her.

"You're done with the project?" she asks as she takes the player from you.

You shake your head and take a seat across from her.

"So music didn't work, huh?"

Again, you shake your head at her. She looks at you for a while before standing up and walking towards the shelves. She is perceptive, and you know that she'll be back with the books you need.

"You know, I'm surprised. You've never had any trouble with the other projects before. In fact, you aced them all. So, why are you having trouble with this one?"

You watch her as she lays a book down before she skims the pages.

"Can't you just let your heart guide your hand like I told you? You're overthinking the whole thing, I think. Just—hey! What are you staring at?"

Only at the way the sunlight streaming through the window turns her pink hair into a fascinating shade of strawberry blonde...

"I think you've gotten uglier, ugly. Haven't been sleeping well?"

Evade. Lie. Save. Somehow, it doesn't seem right to tell her how your mind is busy looking for the right colors to mix to get the exact same shade—*pink, of course... and sienna... maybe a bit of yellow, a dash of white...*



“Hey, you’re this close to having your fingers broken, one by—oh who am I kidding? You’re right, Sai. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

...A little bit of orange, no... orange might not work... rose, rose might work...

“It’s just that—he’s back, Sai... Sasuke-kun is back.”

...Rose or pink... and... what?

“What?”

“Sasuke-kun’s back. He enrolled and...well...”

Her voice is laced with worry and fear and something, and it is only now that you really do take the time to notice—her eyes do look more tired than usual.

You watch her for a while, gauge her reaction. You don’t really understand her. Sasuke’s back. Wasn’t that what she wanted?

“Wasn’t that what you’ve always wanted?”

“Well...I—I suppose...yes, yes, that was what I wanted... but...”

“Afraid that Sasuke-kun will bolt the moment he sees how ugly you’ve gotten?”

You watch the landscape of her face change from a worried one to an annoyed one. But somehow, you know that insulting her is the right thing to do. Same insults. Different Results. It’s weird. You don’t think you’ll ever understand people. They’re much too...contradictory.

“No! Of course not! I’m not—”

“Then, why aren’t you out there celebrating with them? I take it that Dickless is already with him?”

“Yes, well—”

“Are you not his friend, if nothing else?”

You watch her face change again—it’s fascinating really. She seems happy, determined, and yet... strangely sorrowful. You never quite realize what it is that you’ve said wrong but apparently—

“Friend... yeah... Hey, you know what, Sai? You’re right. I’m going there right now.”

Your musings are cut short when she gets up and gathers her things into her bag haphazardly. She takes ten steps away from you before she stops and looks back.

“So, I guess this is goodbye... I—Thanks, Sai.”

You think that this must be the most sincere smile she has ever given you—it’s completely different from the fake ones that she always sports and fools you with. But



you can't shake off the feeling that her farewell somehow meant more. And you feel... disconcerted? You don't know...you never know.

What you do know, however, is that Uchiha Sasuke is back.

And things will change.

It's probably one of the most clairvoyant statements you've ever made—*things will change*.

And indeed they do.

Although, you think that it's still a bit of an understatement...

Things will change.

The understatement of the year.

'Everything will change' must've been more accurate.

It's no secret that you're not in tune with your emotions. But you do know enough to realize that things have taken an unpleasant turn.

For one thing, you are now second best.

He's good at painting and drawing and sculpting and everything else involving art—even musical instruments—he's everything that they've said he would be.

He's the school's legend.

He's the proverbial wasted talent who dropped out of school for pursuits much too dark and dreary to be forgiven, and on the eve of a particularly important interschool contest, no less. *Traitor*, they call him. But now he's back and much too talented to be ignored.

He's particularly good at painting. A lot like you, but *different*. He has less technique, less refinement, less color, less accuracy—and yet, he's better. His works are right up there with Picasso and Monet and Rembrandt and every other great artist who have earned a place in the history books—his works take your breath away and you don't know how you feel about it. You suspect, though, that your normal neutral mood has shifted slightly towards the negative.

'The great masters are great because they combine great talent with great passion,' she told you once when you asked her. You winced at the redundant use of the word 'great' back then and threw her an insult just for the heck of it, but you didn't really mind because she's a good conversationalist—always engaging and always informative and always eager. You enjoy her company, just like you enjoy Naruto's, only more, because she provokes thoughts and insights and talks intelligently. And you're not happy at all that it's hard to come by now that she has gone into hiding.



You'd like to see her again. You really haven't gotten the right shade of pink yet... that day, at the library...

She never did go to her friends that day.

"Hey Sai!"

So lost in your thoughts, you fail to see them approach you. You ignore Naruto's greeting, choosing instead to stare at his companion. He appears all too rude and arrogant, standing there indifferently with his hands in his pockets, but you smile nonetheless—polite and so utterly fake. You rack your head for an insult—a nickname—provoking and...

Dickless—as you so warmly call him—appears to see through your intentions and steps in before you can find a new nickname for the traitor. You divert your gaze and smile instead at the one who is talking to you.

"Sai, do you happen to know where Sakura-chan is? I—we've been trying to find her these past few days, but to no avail. We've looked everywhere. And we asked the librarian, she said that you and Sakura-chan were talking in the library the day that *Teme* here arrived." He gestures to his companion, who is standing behind him with an air of impatience and annoyance and something else. "So I thought that maybe you know—"

"I don't know where Ugly is."

He looks at you then, and all thoughts of insults and nicknames flee from your head as you see that his eyes are dark and black and abysmal and terrible and empty-but-not-quite...

Your smile falters.

You don't exactly like how he makes you feel.

It's uncomfortable and unpleasant and you don't like it. You try your best not to get affected but it's hard—especially when he's in front of you, nimble hands ghosting over a canvas.

You're doing self-portraits today.

Your hold on your paint brush tightens—*it's not supposed to*—and there's a smudge where your ear should be. It's an error you won't be able to rectify.

You sigh as you move your own canvas out of the way so that you can start anew. Without your canvas, your view of his back and his work is unobstructed. And his eye stares back at you from the canvas—dark, cold... black.

Charcoal—he chooses charcoal.

You can never quite put up an empty new canvas fast enough.



You don't exactly like how he makes you *feel*.

One of the few things that you know about yourself is your need to understand, your need to comprehend... and it is this need that drives you to Yamanaka Ino's humble apartment.

She is here.

You know, because her drab, battered, much-too-old sneakers lying unobtrusively in the corner are the first things you notice.

"Ahh. Sai-kun, what brings you here?"

Ino's voice—shrill and high distracts you from your object of interest. It doesn't matter anyway. It doesn't matter if Sakura is here. You've come here for Ino—gossip extraordinaire, indispensable fountain of information.

"I wanted to ask..."

She nods, silently urging you to continue.

"...about Uchiha Sasuke."

And you pretend not to have heard the soft gasp from the direction of the kitchen. You pretend not to have noticed Ino's worried glance towards that direction. It's... easier. But Ino is wily, and she grins at you in a way that's only short of menacing, and you can't help but think twice about your decision to come.

"Ahh, Sasuke-kun has even caught the attention of the Prince of Apathy here, eh?"

You don't answer because you don't know what to say. So you choose to remain silent, let her draw her own conclusions, let her think.

A pregnant pause follows; she waits for you to react, to defend yourself, to splutter and be embarrassed and do things that you should never give her the satisfaction of seeing. So, instead, you continue to smile at her, still polite, still fake.

Taking the hint, she continues.

"What do you want to know about Sasuke-kun exactly?"

"Anything worth knowing," you answer. It's vague, but enough for Ino to launch into her litany of facts and figures about Uchiha Sasuke.

"He was eight, you know... when his whole family was murdered..."

And so, you learn the tale of a prestigious clan betrayed and disgraced, butchered with a brutality that bordered on insanity. You learn of the boy who was left behind to suffer through it all. You learn of the sacrifices made as the boy followed the dark path of revenge. You learn of the bonds broken—the friendships forsaken, the love



relinquished. You learn of anger and hatred and greed and treachery. You learn of Uchiha Sasuke.

His life would be a blockbuster if it was a movie. Who would've ever thought that there were still people in this world who pursued larger-than-life revenge goals?

Or maybe Ino's just a masterful storyteller.

Or a liar.

Or a gossip.

Because really, if Uchiha Sasuke got his revenge, then shouldn't he be in prison right now for murder?

Suicide—Uchiha Itachi died of *suicide*—it's all over the news. Certainly, the school won't accept someone who... right? The school won't do that.

What you do know, though, is that a lot of things are clearer now that you know the story.

You glance out the window and note that the bright blue sky has given way to the dark indigo of night.

"Well, it's getting late. It's time for me to leave. Thank you for your time."

A polite smile. A polite bow.

It's funny...what people will do for nothing at all...

Yamanaka Ino practically spends her whole afternoon talking. It must've been tiring. And yet she does it for free.

Humans are weird.

You close the door behind you, slip your feet into your shoes, and stoop to tie the shoelaces. You'll leave now, but the voices drifting from inside the room are much too interesting.

"He's gone now, Sakura. You can come out."

Eavesdropping is bad, but you don't really care.

"Ino, you know, you really painted Sasuke-kun in a bad light in your story."

"Ah, Forehead girl, I was just being honest. The guy's a bastard. I don't know why you're still so crazy about him even after he left you on that bench."

"He's not a bastard, Ino-pig."

"If he's such a prince charming, then why are you hiding from him, eh?"

"I never said he was a prince charm—"



“Now, Sai—he’s a wonderful hunk of man. And I’m pretty sure his inquiry about Sasuke was half because of you. He might even like you!”

Wrong.

Women are such frivolous and assuming creatures.

“No! I’m pretty sure I had nothing to do with Sai’s sudden curiosity about Sasuke-kun! He can’t possibly like me *that* way! He’s Sai! Sai doesn’t *like-like* anyone! Besides...”

Besides?

“Besides?”

“He’s not Sasuke-kun...”

And somehow, you can’t help but wonder if that last comment has anything to do with the sudden urgency with which you are now tying your shoelaces.

“She’s at Yamanaka Ino’s house.”

You can’t help but feel slightly ill at ease here at the roof top.

There’s a breathtaking sunset—beautiful, picturesque, serene, a perfect soup of orange and yellow, and red, red, red—and then there’s Uchiha Sasuke.

Uchiha Sasuke, who a few moments ago was brushing furiously at a canvas, now stares at you with an expression that you can’t quite understand—there’s gratitude but there’s mistrust and annoyance and resentment...? Impossible. Why will he feel any resentment towards you?

And you can’t quite take the quiet intensity of his eyes, eerily reflecting the sunset in such a way that they look impossibly red. And with eyes like that, you can easily believe that he really is capable of leaving the girl he secretly loved unprotected on a bench, that he really injured Naruto bad enough in a fight to have induced a semi-coma, that he could have murdered his brother and made it look like suicide; that you can believe all those larger-than-life stories about him and that he scares you more than you’ll like to admit. So you divert your gaze—you stare at something familiar, something nice—you stare at his painting.

You wonder if the red, red blood on that much-too-morbid battlefield was somehow inspired by the red, red sunset... because, really, they’re the same shade... the *exact* same shade...

It’s only apt that the most unsettling person you’ve ever met also makes the most unsettling paintings.

You are roused from your musings when he sets down his brush and stands up.



“Are you sure?” he asks, voice much too deep and much too serious to belong to a teenager but only much too appropriate for Uchiha Sasuke.

“Yes.”

He leaves you then, paintbrushes in his pocket and canvas tucked under his arm, the only indication of his gratitude is a brusque nod in your direction. And it is all you can do to keep from sighing in relief.

You are smiling at him, always polite and always fake, but he never does return the smile. And you can’t help but wonder how it’ll feel like if you greet the world the same way Uchiha Sasuke does—no pretenses, no hiding your ugliness.

You stare at his retreating back, disappointed that you can never find a suitable insult for him. ‘Ugly’ is already taken, after all. And you sure as hell can’t call him beautiful.

A series of events are set into motion by your little information leakage. Events that look like they came straight out of a sappy romance story—a bad one at that, or in Ugly’s own words: one where the woman’s so frustratingly weak-willed and the man’s just a chauvinistic pig that gets a lot of undeserved love.

And you’re just lucky (or unlucky) enough to get a front row seat to all the insanity.

That your new apartment is located across the Yamanaka residence, you can attribute to pure coincidence. But that Uchiha Sasuke is your new roommate—that is the hand of fate at work.

It’s not fair, really. Fate has such a sick sense of humor.

It’s just your luck to be lumped in the same house as the most unsettling person on the planet.

And he’s a bit of a peeping tom too, in a scary stalker-ish kind of way....

But apparently, he’s a peeping tom with a good eye because he can recreate that elusive shade of pink-that-looks-like-strawberry-blonde that you simply can’t ever get no matter how hard you try.

It’s a beautiful painting, really. This rendition of Sakura tending to some flowers on a balcony—a plethora of pinks and yellows and greens and blues—all in pastel, delicate, devoid of boldness, muted down, weakened.

All wrong.

You’ve never had to clench your fists to keep them from moving until now. And this scares you because you’ve never been impulsive before. How can you, when you’ve never even had an impulse, desire...*passion*. You don’t have those. And each and every thing you do in life is as precise as your brush strokes.



Something tells you it's because he's somehow being an asshole. He's being unfair to Sakura. This painting, this beautiful painting of his, is an insult to your friend's character.

...Except, she has never been *your* friend, has she?

She has always been *his* friend just as Naruto is *his* friend as well.

So where does that leave you?

In the fringes, the edges, the border, the frame...

And you can't help but wonder...

Is the frame still part of the picture?

Something tells you it's not.

You're smacked right in the middle of the mayhem, and you can't help but think that the fringes would've been a much better place.

"Pass the ramen, will ya?"

But as it is, here you are, pressing your face at the window, praying—yes, praying—to God in heaven that Sakura will surrender. Yeah, she's your friend and all, but you don't think you can take another moment of Naruto's incessant whining.

"There's no more ramen left, Dickless."

It's bad enough that he's living in your apartment without paying any rent. But this—

"Then can you make some, please?"

—this is just too much.

"Why don't you make your own ramen? Or does your lack of penis prevent you from doing so?"

"I can't! Sakura-chan might come out and I might miss the whole thing. And what do penises have to do with ramen, anyway? Please make ramen?"

You don't really know if he's consciously trying to manipulate you or if he's just stupid.

"No."

He doesn't look like he's planning anything bad.

"Aww... please?"

"No."

In fact, he looks downright innocent.



“I’ll fart...”

Ah, manipulation.

Too bad, though, because you fall for it completely.

It doesn’t matter anyway. It’s not like watching Sasuke angst under the rain is more interesting than making ramen.

You sigh as you stand up; best to get things over with, after all.

It’s awful, really—this business. You’re being manipulated into making ramen, and you already feel miserable. Sakura’s being manipulated into forgiveness (*and love, Uchiha Sasuke says, but he already has that and therefore doesn’t need to do any manipulation to get it—he just doesn’t know it yet*) and you can’t even begin to imagine how that must make her feel. It’s weird—that love will be easier to come by than forgiveness.

He’s persistent, though—Uchiha Sasuke—for two weeks, he never falters in his daily trek to Ino’s house, always asking for Sakura and always being denied. Two weeks of his fruitless efforts and he switches to a new tactic—standing outside for a full hour, just staring at Sakura’s window. He’s been doing it every single day, for about a week now.

And you’ve thought he’ll give up today, what with the torrential downpour. But as it is, he has just seen the rain as a ‘perfect opportunity to coax her out’.

Naruto acknowledges his genius. You just think that he’s a first class asshole.

Still, though, faced with the reality and the gravity of the situation, you can’t help but wish that Sakura won’t give in. It’s something you don’t quite understand. But you tell yourself that it’s for her sake, that she won’t fall head first into a relationship in which she will more likely end up miserable than happy.

God forbid that you’re wishing it for your own sake. You wouldn’t—

“Oi Sai! Come here! Something’s happening!”

But then, why is your heart throbbing in the most unpleasant way as you rush to the window, dread and urgency melding into wobbling knees and a knot in your stomach?

As it is, you’re just in time to see Sakura collapse into Sasuke’s arms in a way that you can only describe as ‘complete abandon’, and the latter’s triumphantly arrogant smirk as she does so.

You want to hate him, really. But you can’t—not when you see how uncharacteristically soft his eyes are as he returns the fierce embrace. If you don’t know him any better, you’ll say he’s holding back tears, maybe even crying. But you can’t really tell because it’s raining. Sakura, though, is a different matter altogether, her unabashed sobbing audible even through the din of the pouring rain.



It's a scene straight out of a cheesy romantic movie, indeed. The frustratingly weak female and the chauvinistic pig of a male locked in a needy embrace underneath a shower of rain. It's so cliché, it's disgusting. And Naruto's hoots of victory are just making matters worse.

But with your trusty fake smile plastered on your face, none of your true feelings are betrayed.

A damn good thing too, because you can hear Sakura's half-hearted complaints of *'what a moron Sasuke-kun is'* and *'how stupid Sasuke-kun is'* and *'how it's Sasuke-kun's fault if he gets sick'* through the door. And it opens and you see him come in, a soaked Sakura clutching the sleeves of his equally soaked gray jacket, and you realize immediately that your suspicions are true, because the redness of his eyes betrays the tears he had shed.

You'd say you've lost some respect for him for his lack of control over his emotions.

But you're miserable and he's content... and somehow you feel like the loser.

The only good thing about the days that follow is the stability that the denouement brought. Without the drama, without the angst, and after that much-too-typical climax of the silly love story and the equally silly loving-girl-makes-chicken-soup-for-sick-boy skit that had followed, life has dulled into a steady pace—with everyone content and happy... except for you.

"Hey, Sasuke-kun, what's the title of this painting?"

"Sunset."

"But it's a battlefield."

"Yes, Sakura, obviously, the sun sets in battlefields too."

"Couldn't you have chosen the sunset over a sea or over a—a—I don't know, somewhere happier?"

"Don't bother, Sakura-chan, that's just the way *Teme* expresses all his deepest and darkest morbid thoughts."

But stability is a little mercy that you'll gladly accept. Little mercies, after all, are hard to come by these days, especially with Naruto becoming a permanent fixture in your apartment—freeloading and loving it. At the very least, though, his presence in the apartment prevents you from feeling like a third wheel, especially when Sakura comes to visit.

She's wonderful, really, lavishing attention upon both you and Naruto equally. It's a social skill, you think, that's very important—this tact and this kind consideration



for the feelings of others. You wonder if it comes naturally to her, or if it's something she consciously does.

Sasuke, though, is a different matter. Even with Sakura's superb social skills, he is still put on a pedestal far higher than either you or Naruto, and he expects to be put there or else... or else, he'll sulk.

"How about this one, Sasuke-kun, what's its title?"

"Hospital."

"What?"

"It's a hospital"

You turn your head, curious at what's happening. You see Sakura looking at a painting, her face contorted into an expression of confusion.

"But it's grotesque..."

Doubly curious now, you saunter over to where she and Naruto are standing to peer into the painting yourself. As it is, it's a really grotesque painting of a white building that looks like it's about to eat people up, propped against a grayish and reddish sky that seems equally foreboding. The only indication that it's really a hospital is the symbol above the huge doors, the one with two snakes and some sort of rod.

On the walls of the hospital are souls, seemingly embedded into the very concrete, done in the same way that the renaissance painters did, only this time, their expressions are wrought with an expression of pure agony and misery that you've never really seen anywhere else.

And you can't help but be in awe at the sheer genius of the painting.

"That's the point."

His voice, a deep baritone, sounds scathing and condescending as he talks to her. But she seems oblivious to it as she prods on.

"But the hospital is a good thing, Sasuke-kun. It's a place where many people get saved."

"No. It's a place where people die."

"B-But, those who die are already dying when they—oh never mind. I don't need to listen to your cynical view of the world. Anyway, I'm pretty late for my appointment with Tsunade-shishou, see you later Sai, Naruto... and Sasuke-kun, try to think happier thoughts next time, hm? Love you. Bye bye."

And you watch her as she goes over to her Sasuke-kun to give him a peck on the cheek, which he receives impassively, before going out the door. And you can't help but decide now that the stories about him probably aren't true, because how can a man without scruples deserve happiness like this?



Conveniently, you forget that “justice”, in a world like this, is a mere myth.

“What’s that one called?”

And you can hardly believe that it’s your voice speaking and that you’re actually gesturing to what he’s uncovering at this very moment. He looks at you, then, eyes calculating and scrutinizing, with an underlying hostility that even Naruto can sense. You know, because at the corner of your eye, you can see him tensing, getting ready, perhaps, to stop an impending fight.

But your mind can only focus on the person you’re looking at—Uchiha Sasuke, still silent, probably deliberating whether to give an answer or to beat you up. And for a moment, you think that he’s probably leaning towards the latter.

“Redemption.”

He turns away from you then, continues uncovering the canvas, picks up his brush, dips it in red and white and a bit of yellow, and adds the final touches to the rose-colored hair of the girl in the painting.

Days pass by and you find a place for yourself in this posse, somewhere in between past and present and somehow, if things continue this way, you’ve assured yourself a place in the future. It’s a queer relationship, that’s for sure. The dynamics can be confusing at times, almost like a complicated dance, but it’s workable and you might even say that you’re content.

You and Naruto are the same as always, with him bristling at your off-hand comments about his masculinity and his penis. You can even call him your friend, and vice versa, probably.

You and Sasuke are hardly friends. You don’t even have conversations with him at all. But you do unite against Naruto, whom you both find incredibly stupid. It’s not as much of a friendship as an alliance and you guess that’s the most you can have with him.

With Sakura, though, things have gone a bit awry. You don’t really know where you stand when it comes to her. It’s weird—but somehow, talking to her suddenly seems a bit forbidden ever since she and Sasuke became ‘official’. Though, that doesn’t make much sense, because Naruto treats her just as he always has. And, logically, nothing should’ve changed between the two of you.

And when three of you are together, it’s always either ‘Sasuke, Naruto, and you’ or ‘Naruto, Sakura, and you’ or ‘the three of them excluding you’. It’s never ‘Sasuke, Sakura, and you’ because you always find yourself shunning that situation—it’s irrational and illogical and totally uncharacteristic of you, but you can’t seem to help yourself. And if they have noticed this, then they’re certainly not saying.



Still, though, it's a peace that you won't trade for any other. Because the routine has turned you somewhat numb and therefore somewhat closer to what's 'normal' for you—that is, the state of the world before Uchiha Sasuke came.

You would never have expected that it would be you yourself who would break the humdrum.

It all started with a random decision to go to the library once again—a habit that, like your conversations with Sakura, had died once Uchiha Sasuke arrived. You were trying (and failing) once again to work on your abstract and the thought of the impending deadline spurred you to take action.

You saw her there, wearing a cream-colored cashmere sweater, and a sense of déjà vu washed over you immediately. Logic told you to walk out before she saw you but instead, you found yourself walking over to her.

Your conversation started out normal enough—just as always, with insults and admonishments and a few half-hearted 'how's life going for you' type questions. But immediately after the typical pleasantries and unpleasantries, things started getting awkward.

And you found yourself silently staring at how—again—the light from the window colors her hair in a pretty shade of strawberry blonde. She too, seemed quite uneasy, and was making fake little coughing sounds to compensate for the silence. However, instead of helping her alleviate the awkwardness of the situation, you just had to make it worse by reaching out to touch her hair.

It was impulsive and uncharacteristic and telling because for someone as uncommunicative and as unfeeling as you, the simple action spoke volumes. You didn't even know what you did until you saw her look at you with the most confused expression, her mouth slack and her eyes wide with shock.

You instantly pulled your hand back as if you were burned, took one step backwards, gave a small bow, said goodbye, and walked out the door, your heart swimming with feelings that your head struggled hard to trivialize.

That you switched apartments the next day, however, was proof that it was not 'nothing' as you so wanted it to be. It irked you that whatever you had gained the previous years were all shattered by that single moment of impulsivity, but what's done was done and there's nothing you could do.

Your only solace was that Naruto and Sasuke appeared to have no idea whatsoever about what's going on, as they even helped you move. Sakura, however, was absent throughout the whole thing. *Busy with her shishou*, according to Sasuke, but you knew better.

And it appears that moving away is a futile action anyway, as the previous events are still plaguing your mind even after a whole week and the images of all the



cheesy romantic scenes between her and him are still burned into your mind, seemingly on constant replay.

And it's not helping at all that it's raining either.

You are roused from your morose thoughts, however, when you hear the doorbell ring. Groggily, you get up, wondering about whoever it is that is knocking—because, really, as far as you know, you don't have friends. Naruto and Sakura, maybe. But they have always been *his* and not yours. And you just can't imagine anyone else coming in for a social call.

Whoever it is, though, surely seems impatient. You vaguely wonder if the person at your door has a personal vendetta against your doorbell, because really, they seem furious at it... or maybe they're just getting soaked by the rain. So you hurry to the door, more for your doorbell than the one getting soaked.

You prepare your smile even before you open the door, a habit you can't seem to get rid of. Nor do you want to, anyway. You have never expected, though, that the smile will fade the moment you open the door.

"Sakura?"

"What? No insult this time?"

She's smiling at you too, fake like the first time, but a bit more strained this time. You almost close the door at her right then and there. Instead, you move aside and let her pass.

"Cozy place you've got here," she remarks, closing her umbrella and placing it beside the door as she speaks. You watch her as she takes a few steps into the foyer but divert your gaze when she turns back and looks at you.

"Sai... I..."

And the sound of her voice, so weak and trembling and vulnerable, draws you in and you just can't help but look at her, disheveled and slightly soaked from the downpour and think that she might just be the first pretty girl you've seen.

And it bothers you that your heart is speeding. It hurts but it's not at all unpleasant and you won't mind it at all if only you aren't so scared. And you don't know what it is... but you think that maybe, this thing you feel—this ache—seems suspiciously like hope.

"You know... we... let's just forget about that awkward moment we had last week."

You try not to feel so disappointed that the ache has just turned unpleasant when you hear those words come tumbling out her mouth. You plan to make a witty comment, but as it is, your throat's far too dry for you to speak.



So you just stare at her, mute and immobile and unresponsive. You can see that it worries her—your impassiveness—and you can't help but feel bitterly glad about it.

"I—I just don't want to lose you...your friendship," she begins again, taking a different tactic. "Oh and Ino-pig is so annoying with her 'I told you so's' and Naruto is so blatant with his loyalty to Sasuke-kun, and you're really the only impartial friend I have".

Wrong.

You're not impartial.

You're on her side, she just doesn't know it or maybe she does and she's just not as innocent as she portrays herself to be.

Maybe this is what 'being used' is... You don't know... You never know.

"Besides, you're one of the few people I can actually have sane conversations with." She laughs, awkward and forced.

"Sai..." she calls, and your sour satisfaction over making her uncomfortable earlier melts when you see that she's dangerously close to tears.

"I hope you're not going to cry, you know how much uglier you are when you're bawling."

She laughs this time, genuine and uninhibited, relieved and grateful and beautifully melodic.

"Now come on, I'm making tea."

You walk past her and lead the way to the kitchen. Immediately, you head to the stove and start heating some water. You have your back turned to her but you can hear her shuffling, as if she's taking out a stool and sitting by the counter.

"I've been meeting with Tsunade-shishou regularly these past few days."

You don't answer her this time. But the tension has been alleviated earlier and she knows you well enough to know that you're listening even if you're not responding.

"She's advising me to go to med school."

"And?" you ask, curious this time. There's no med school in your city. The nearest one is at the next town, and it's not even a good one.

"I think I'm going to take her advice."

She says it as if the decision is trivial and small. You're not fooled. This decision of hers has hundreds of implications but there's only one bottom line: She's leaving...but she doesn't want to.

"Where?"

"Tokyo."



“What about art school?”

You watch her as she smiles wryly, as if embittered by something.

“I was never really good at art anyway.”

You know that she never really made exceptional artworks. She was industrious and was decently talented, true. But she was never ‘great’ at art, so to speak.

“All I was good at was the bookish stuff. Medicine suits me more, I think.”

You don’t think you can argue with that. Of course, in the point of view of an artist, you know that Sakura’s opinion on herself is completely correct. It irks you, though, that she’s not.

“And money? You’re paying your way through art school, aren’t you?”

“My parents are going to take care of it. They didn’t support me in my decision to take up fine arts but they’re willing to support me if I take up med. Shishou talked to them about it. They were... happy.”

You’re running out of arguments and you can’t help but wish you have more. Still... there is one... though, you just *hate* to have use it.

“And Sasuke?”

But you do so anyway.

She pauses, her mouth closed tight and her brows knitted together in some thought. You don’t quite know. Maybe it’s worry, sadness, you don’t know. You also don’t know whether you’re happy or sad that you finally found an argument that she doesn’t have an answer to.

It’s bittersweet—this, and it’s threatening your much-valued sanity (or insanity, whichever way you look at it) because really, you’ve never ever been as unstable and undecided as you are now.

You never thought you could be fickle.

“He doesn’t love me anyway.”

Wrong.

You keep silent, not bothering to correct her, not wanting to.

You’ve never thought you can be utterly selfish either.

She, however, takes your silence as a sign to continue.

“I’m just—he never shows me, you know... that he cares. I have no idea... no idea at all if he...”

She falters then, her voice breaking. She stops, takes a deep breath to calm herself and goes on. She’s brave, you think, but utterly blind. But then again, she has



never been able to read an artist's canvas without a textbook guiding her. It only follows that she can't read Sasuke's.

"I don't think I matter to him. I thought—"

This time, she does start crying. And you can't help but feel that you want to hold her tight and kiss her tears away and do all of those cheesy romantic stuff that are horribly corny but helpful. You don't quite understand, however, where your drive comes from. You have an inkling; but you're not sure—never sure—because you don't know what to base it from. How does one know or recognize love, anyway?

"I thought he loved me back, this time."

The memory of Uchiha Sasuke adding the final details to his painting flits through your mind and his voice saying 'redemption' rings in your ears over and over and over. You wonder if this is proof that your 'conscience' exists.

You really don't know. You're not sure.

It doesn't matter anyway, because you won't be listening to it.

"But, if he loves me, then he should at least show me. He doesn't even pay attention! And he doesn't even acknowledge me. He's so distant, like he's always in another world, one where I can't reach."

You scorn her, really, for her stupidity. You scorn all women, actually. Their inability to view things objectively makes them blind. Women and their 'If... then...' statements that are just too generic and too narrow to be of any use.

It's ironic and contradictory and so utterly stupid. Women prattle on about love incessantly and yet they know nothing of it. You don't understand why they can't 'feel' and 'think' at the same time. You've never understood (but you're beginning to, aren't you?).

"I don't think I can stand it anymore... I don't want to hurt anymore."

She's not supposed to be hurting but she's too blind to know that. You pity Uchiha Sasuke, because he will unnecessarily lose something important. But you don't pity him enough to help him.

"I don't..."

And when she gets consumed by wracking sobs, you know that it's your cue.

It's bad for you, you know, but you approach her anyway. You sit on the stool beside hers and gently pat her head. It's an affectionate gesture, similar to that awkward touch you gave her at the library, and yet completely and utterly different. The first one had been spontaneous. This—this is more like you—calculated, deliberate, manipulative.

She leans into you, seeking comfort from the worst possible person to ask it from.



You don't make any move to put your arm around her (because you've never ever had to do something like that before and... it scares you so much—this intense desire to do so). Instead, you just stay there, 'like a pillar', you think, except, you don't feel strong at all. Your legs are turning into jelly and there's a knot in your stomach and a lump in your throat. It's uncomfortable, but it's not unpleasant, not unpleasant at all.

The two of you stay this way for quite a while. You savor it, because something tells you that it's the only taste you'll ever get of whatever it is that you're looking for. And when she's calm and she has straightened up and moved away from you, wiped her tears and gathered her dignity, you try not to be too disappointed at the end of the first and last.

She looks at you then, eyes clear and challenging and perfectly, *perfectly* green, her voice staccato and weak and pathetically pleading.

"Give me a reason to stay."

You want to think that this is an innuendo, but you know it's not.

Her request—concise and compact—is actually a question. She's asking for your opinion. And you think she's the cruelest person on earth.

Do you think Sasuke loves her?

You don't think... You know.

If Sasuke loves her, then she'll stay.

Then she'll have to stay...

Unless...

"I'm sorry..."

You mean it, really you do. *You're sorry for being so selfish.*

But an apology's the only thing you can give. Truth, you'll withhold.

"I'm sorry."

"N-No, it's okay—I... It's not your fault."

Yes it is, but she doesn't need to know that.

"I guess it was bound to happen. I mean, Ino said so... I was just too blind to see it. Anyway, no use crying about it... or else I'll become even uglier, right?"

She laughs again, weak and watery. She has her answer, but it's not what she thinks it is. She looks down at her feet and takes a deep breath before looking back at you.

"Alright, I have to go. Bye Sai, I guess, this is the last time we'll see each other."



Then, she moves towards you and gives you the warmest hug, though you don't really know because you've never had anything to compare it to.

"Thank you... for everything."

You try to search yourself for any feelings of guilt, because if there's any right time to feel it, then this moment is it. You've just ruined the lives of two people and you should feel guilty but you don't find anything when you search your heart. And as she says goodbye and walks out the door, you can't help but wonder what the consequences of your selfishness are.

Uchiha Sasuke will become a better artist.

And when she turns and looks back at you before leaving completely and gives you a bright smile, friendly and warm and beautiful like the ones she gives to Sasuke, you can't help but think of how much of a bastard you are.

"I'll give you a free check-up when I become a doctor. Bye, Sai!"

Because she's '*redemption*' and now neither of you can have her, but he needs her more and you know that. And it's your fault and you've probably just destroyed someone who has never really wronged you, and really, *what have you done?*

Fate, you decide, is your arch-enemy from now on.

Really, you don't quite like the idea of having the universe conspire against you, trying to make you guilty for that one sin you have committed. Seriously, it's just one sin... *one sin*. Technically, it isn't even a lie.

As it is, here you are, staring straight at the fruits of your selfishness: a raging, uncontrolled, almost-insane Uchiha who you won't even dare touch with a ten foot pole.

And you're thankful that he doesn't know that it's your fault that she left. Because, really, you'll hate to be in the place of that painting he's destroying right now.

It's such a waste, really. Because it's such a pretty picture... it captures the color of her hair perfectly.

"She promised!"

You don't even know how you've gotten involved in this mess. You just wanted to get the set of brushes you left behind when you moved. They don't come cheap, after all.

You note, however, that Sasuke is holding a bottle in his hands—gin, you think. They've been drinking, him and Naruto. Naruto, who is currently standing nearby, looks sobered by his friend's outburst. He's wearing a serious expression—the most serious you've ever seen on him.

Friendship, you think, is more beautiful than love... the romantic kind, anyway.



“She promised!”

But your reflections halt when Sasuke tears another portion of the painting, finally succeeding in destroying it. You’re transfixed as you watch him throw it angrily to the floor. He’s like a child having a tantrum, you think, and it’s almost funny, how he kicks the ruined painting, almost as an afterthought. It’s almost funny—but you don’t find yourself laughing.

“She *fucking* promised!”

His voice, loud and sounding slightly hysterical, worries you. It strikes you odd that in between growls and snarls, he’s smiling—or sneering—bitterly and in a weirdly psychotic way.

And you become even more worried when he takes his bottle and pours its contents all over what was once a work of art.

And when he shoves his hands into his pockets, unstable and so obviously inebriated now, and takes out a lighter, your heart stops and you’re paralyzed—in fear and sheer awe—because he’s passionate to the point of insanity and you’re seeing his art, his love, his being, his essence in its rawest form. It’s powerful and hair-raising and this... this must have been how it would’ve felt like to be watching as Van Gogh lopped off his own ear.

It’s a sight to behold, really—Uchiha Sasuke in a rampage.

And you’re slightly surprised to find that Naruto has more sense than you, because now he’s moving towards Sasuke, moving to restrain him and prevent what would have been a disastrous fire.

He gets shoved away, however, when he attempts to grab his friend’s shoulder. And you can’t help but feel sorry for him because he doesn’t deserve to take this kind of crap from anyone, but he does, because he is *Naruto*.

You almost flinch as you watch him passively take undeserved punches, and you wonder if you should help but you’re there in the fringes... always in the fringes, never in the heart.

You don’t know how much time passes, but the scuffle—which is not really a scuffle—comes to a halt when Naruto manages to shove Sasuke into the wall, wherein the latter promptly collapses into a heap on the floor. With his back against the wall and his legs stretched out before him, Sasuke looks up and covers his face with his hands.

He’s in a pitiful state, and you can’t quite make yourself forget that it is you who has put him there. He bends his knees and hunches over and you suspect that he’s crying, hiding his face, still trying to be dignified, even in his weakest moment.

And Naruto, bruised and scarred now, looks sympathetically at his friend. And you can’t quite follow the shifting of emotions in his eyes... there’s pity and anger and pain and so many others that you can’t quite recognize.



“I’m going to go find Ino, she probably knows where Sakura-chan is,” he practically growls, and you know right then that the emotion that has won out is anger, probably directed at Sakura. And you’ve never quite anticipated that things like this can happen because of you. And you think you feel guilty... because *they* were perfect and *you* destroyed them.

“Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid, will you Sai?”

You can’t deny this request—not after what *you’ve* done.

You’ll have to accept this: your punishment and your pleasure—a whole night of watching Uchiha Sasuke *break*.

You wince at the unpleasant taste of cold green tea, it takes a lot of effort to swallow it, because it is bitter and cold and not at all what you want—but you do so, anyway.

Call it penance.

It’s your own fault anyway... You’ve left the tea untouched for too long because you’re distracted by your conscience, and yes, you acknowledge its presence now. Because really, what else could’ve deprived you of all that sleep?

Penance, though, is useless because it doesn’t really change anything. Action, on the other hand, is more useful. And you’ve always been a man of action.

So saying, you drain the rest of your tea into the kitchen sink and head to your former apartment. You’re praying to God that the garbage collectors haven’t touched the trash yet.

Fate may be your enemy, but God certainly isn’t. And when you peak into the trash bin and see the remains of that painting, soggy and stinky but *still there*, you cannot help but feel a wave of relief wash over you. Your hand is dirty, but you don’t mind—there are more important things to worry about. You’ve grown, you think, and you like it... though, of course, you have to suffer through the growing pains same as everyone else.

You spend the rest of the day patching up the remains of the painting. It’s stained and torn and looks rather shabby now, devoid of its former beauty. But it’s enough.

He called it ‘Redemption’.

You scribble the words on the canvas with a marker, messily and hastily because your heart still hurts in a way that’s incomprehensible and unexplainable but perfectly



recognizable. It feels exactly like the time you used Sasuke's name for a reason to make her stay...

You hope this works, because you don't know what else you can do to rectify your mistake if it doesn't. No matter, though, you have to try.

Now, all that's left is to bribe Ino for Sakura's address, mail the painting, and pray for success.

Courage—you discover—is something that has to be collected to be dispensed. And for you, it takes a whole week of collection to be able to return to Uchiha Sasuke's apartment.

But here you are, hovering outside, your heart aching in a pleasant yet unpleasant way. You're staring at a pair of drab, battered, much-too-old sneakers haphazardly discarded on the mat outside the front door—you've seen them before. They're hers.

Your plan—it's a success.

And it *hurts*.

You turn away, then, intent on getting as far away as possible—to retreat into your house and pretend that your heart isn't throbbing and smarting.

"Oi, Sai! What are you doing here?"

You'll wonder why you're terribly short on luck but as it is, Naruto's already pushing you into the apartment and you have little time to think because now you're seeing *her*, you're seeing *her* and *him* together, and it *stings*.

"You're right in time, Sai, Sakura-chan's here but only for a week, she'll pursue her studies but will stay together with the *Tem*—Hey, *Teme*, Sakura-chan... Sai's here!"

She looks at you then—turns her head and really looks at you and she smiles a smile that's just for *you*. Your heart flutters, but it's still aching because she has her head on Sasuke's shoulder and he has his arms around her—and they look beautiful together.

You hope—pray—that they don't hire you for a family portrait, because really, that will just be agonizing and every brushstroke will feel like hundreds of needles being driven into your palm.

"Hi Sai, I'm so glad you're here! I'll go make some tea for all of us."

"Ramen, for me Sakura-chan!"

"No, Naruto, make your own ramen!"

"Aw but Sakura-chan!"

"No buts."



And you're wishing that the sound of their bickering isn't drifting away and disappearing into the kitchen because you don't want to be here with *him*.

You sit on the easy chair adjacent to the couch, not bothering to smile or strike up a conversation. And it's awkward and silent because—

"Thank you."

You must've imagined it. Yes, that's right, because if it isn't your imagination then that means that Uchiha Sasuke actually thanked you. And he shouldn't because it's your fault that—well, it's his fault too for not showing her how much he loves her (and maybe even taking her for granted) but that's just his nature, just as it is in Sakura's nature to be blind. His eyes, though, they're as intimidating as they were when you first saw him. And when he turns to look at you, you see gratitude and anger all at the same time.

"I know you like her."

And to that, you simply don't have an answer. Because you yourself didn't know, and yet he knows, and this explains a lot of things, really—

"Hey, what are you two doing there all serious and sulky-like?"

"They're falling in love with each other, Sakura-chan. Didn't you see the googly-eyes they were giving each other?"

"Shut up Naruto, Sasuke-kun is so not gay!"

"Ah, but yes he is, didn't you notice how—"

And when you see him take hold of Sakura's wrist and pull her closer, when she leans in to press a gentle kiss on his forehead, and he smiles a bit, content and happy and everything you want to be, you realize that you deserve it, after all... his thanks, his gratitude. You've wronged him, yes, but you also made things right. He still dislikes you for liking Sakura, obvious because of his much-too-possessive gestures and that slightly challenging look he's giving you. But he also acknowledges that he is indebted to you because it takes a lot to do what you did. And you think that, if the roles have been reversed, he wouldn't have done the same for you. And you suspect that he knows this too.

You deserve his gratitude.

"You're welcome."

And you smile at him, not fake and yet not happy either—it's sad and pathetic and you pity yourself, really.

But you're not quite in the fringes anymore because you've *given* and you've *shared* and you've *lost*.

And later, when Sakura serves you tea, along with Naruto and Sasuke, you feel a bit better, because you're not in the fringes anymore. You're not in the center either, but you're getting there.



“Thank you, hag.”

You mean it, you really do.

You’re listening to it again—Beethoven’s ‘Appassionata’. It’s as useless as ever, but you don’t mind, because this time your heart’s guiding your hand and your canvas isn’t white and empty, but full of pink and black and orange—not the best color combination, but good enough.

You smile, no longer fake, as you dip your brush into the mixture of black and white.

You think—as you smear the mixture into the middle of all the pink and black and orange—that the painting can use a bit of gray... and it pleases you.

You like it, painting abstracts...

It’s cathartic.



Portfolio

we call you?

what are you?

what did you do?

|1| if their story was a fairytale, what would it be & why |1|

|2| describe a fairytale ending for the tragic boy and the persistent girl |2|

|3| explain why the story of sasuke and sakura can be considered as a fairytale |3|

allurement

{online moderator}

author = [landing in london]

- ☞ *The Little Mermaid* because pink & red are practically related, & well, everyone wants Sasuke.
- ☞ Sakura would die tragically, & there would be this beautiful mourning scene where Sasuke realizes what he's lost and how he needs Sakura. Then POOF, she's miraculously alive again.
- ☞ Because one day they will fall in love & make beautiful babies. Of this I am sure.

alory shannon

some days I wonder if I'm ever really going to grow up; other days, I hope I never do.

author = [the human stain]

- ☞ *Beauty and the Beast*...with Sakura as the Beast. And as for why, two words: monstrous strength.
- ☞ ...That's an interesting question, considering that most classic fairy tales, such as the ones from the Brothers Grimm, did not generally have very happy endings...
- ☞ In fairy tales, there's always something to be overcome, something to be won, a lesson to be learned, or a person who needs to be changed. SasuSaku has all these elements, and even if they don't get their "happy ending" like I hope they do, there's still no denying that their story is a love story...which is really what most fairy tales are all about in the first place.

annie sparklecakes

a fangirl with a laptop and a worn-out capslock key

author = [rockstar + punk rock princess]

- ☞ *Beauty and the Beast*, with Sasuke as the beast, because if anyone suck at social interaction, it's him.
- ☞ With Sasuke coming back to Konoha, of course! And finally realizing that Sakura is actually worth quite a lot to him. Perhaps with some singing animals to drive the point home. No snakes, toads will do.
- ☞ Because they teach all the good qualities little kids should know about relationships and true love (and we all grow up with fairy tales): devotion;



loyalty; the drive to do whatever it takes not to win true love, but to save it; and balance in a relationship. Also, that pink and black look really good together.

arabesque05

easily bribed with miko's awesome.

author = [love is...]

- ☞ *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*, for Sakura's sheer devotion to Sasuke. I can't help but feel that she would go after him, over mountains and through snow; Sakura is no the damsel in distress. She'll save him, whatever the cost, however difficult; that's the devotion that makes me have faith in this ship.
- ☞ There's no riding off happily-ever-after into the sunset for them. Sasuke and Sakura are not, for me, heroes in a story, they are not the glorious; they are the grimmer side of war, the despair and the heartache, the casualties and the loss of innocence. They hurt and they bleed and they fall down; but they survive, and that is their fairytale ending. They live, they live; they, despite everything, find something to live for. Their happiness is all the more beautiful for its frailty.
- ☞ The epicness of their relationship! There is pining and scorning and exile (of sorts) and horrible pasts and vengeance! And, what we wish for them more than anything, that true love conquers all in the end. Moreover, Sasuke's preoccupation with hatred really suggests the importance of love for happiness; and they both, in their own way, need to be saved by the other.

bell.esque

a hyper girl with a crazy laugh who loves to write and eat pastries.

author = [make-up smeared eyes]

- ☞ *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, because Sasuke would be one of the dwarfs (Grumpy) that lurve Sakura (Snow White), but never actually show it. But I think Sasuke, himself, would prefer Sleeping Beauty, because he gets to kill a dragon, and he seems kind of like the hero type (that is, if he ever comes to his senses).
- ☞ If Sakura finds Sasuke while she is searching for him, and he realizes that he really should go back to Konoha (and love her forever and eeeever). But it wouldn't be a perfect fairytale, kind of a sad one, because I think Sakura would have to be the one that heals his heart and mind.
- ☞ It can be considered a fairytale, because the love Sakura displays for him is SO, SO, SO strong. And because in a fairytale, there is always something that is separating the two lovers, but eventually they will always come together (which is hopefully what will happen).

cutecrazyice

author = [i'm yours + colors and cliches]



- ✿ I've never seen a fairytale that clearly depicts the complexity of how Sasuke and Sakura are together. Imperfections are what they're made of, and for me, that's what makes it lovely.
- ✿ There are really just two takes on this: it's either a happy ending, or a tragedy. I'm a sucker for happy endings with a lot of angst in between, so there you go.
- ✿ Dude. Gorgeous, avenging, semi-doomed guy, out to hate the world – and the lovely, vulnerable, temperamental girl that is somehow destined to bring him redemption. How could that not be a fairy tale?

gabzillaz

cover artist: fluff [rapunzel]

hanabi-no-ai

a seductress who used up all her ensnaring skills for the sake of sasusaku/fracturedtales

*{mafia don % editor-in-chief% queen moderator % copyright holder %productions head
% sponsor lookout % creative director % printing coordinator}*

concept = [red carpet + lamentations]

- ✿ Hmm... this is a pretty hard question considering a bunch of fairytale princes are practically Tamaki-Suoh-types (XD) which is definitely NOT Sasuke-ISH. I think that is the reason why I really wanted to get this book done—and hopefully, we were able to capture the fairytale that fits Sasuke and Sakura's love story.
- ✿ Basically Sasuke finally getting that stick out of his ass and finally proclaiming to the world that he freakin' loves Haruno Sakura—and then, they proceed to making lovely, adorable, and numerous babies.
- ✿ Because their story literally had me wishing upon shooting stars, made endlessly doodle hearts with their names on all my notebooks, pushed me to sing spontaneously every time I see them in the same panel/scene in the manga/anime—and it gave me the chance to hope against all odds, dream of simple happiness, and love something from the bottom of my heart. <3D

iMissa

DEFINITELY a procrastinator

author = [home]

- ✿ SasuSaku would undeniably be a fractured fairytale, because of Sasuke's brooding, avenger, GTFO-away-from-me personality versus Sakura's bubbly, healing personality.
- ✿ Sasuke is pardoned of his crimes, learns to forgive himself, and along the way, heals the scars he left on Sakura's heart.
- ✿ SasuSaku should be considered a fairytale because, honestly, not ALL fairytales are nice, but most DO have happy endings (Grimm's fairytales notwithstanding) and if there is any couple out there deserving of a happy ending, it's these two.



its_game_time

a geeky realist with a penchant for the occasional daydreaming of a romantic.

author = [reckless]

- ✿ I think it would be a more modern sort of fairytale; the kind that breaks the mold on the typical "knight in shining armor + fair lady in distress" cliché. It's a better-ending fairytale, the kind that doesn't depend on one character or set of circumstances -- Sasuke and Sakura are two pieces to the pairing rather than one lump sum. "SasuSaku" is about both of them, not just one with a little of the other. That said, I don't think SasuSaku really fits under any established cliché of the past; it makes its own class, but the simple romance and typical strive-to-be-together possibilities give it a fairytale feel.
- ✿ While keeping true to both the personalities of the characters AND the idea of what constitutes a fairytale, a fairytale ending for SasuSaku would be Sakura coming through and rescuing Sasuke, both literally and figuratively. Naturally, Naruto is right in the middle of the Team Seven relationship, but whereas he's bound to save Sasuke from himself, Sakura might take a larger role in saving Sasuke from the metaphorical darkness that would come after: doubt, emotional stumbles, and those things that women are generally better at expressing and dealing with. In a nutshell, the I-will-save-you characteristic has always been part of the foundation for my love of the pairing, and aside from being very plausible canon-wise, it gives a fairytale color to the idea of SasuSaku.
- ✿ The very roots of SasuSaku have a bit of a fairytale feel to them: Sasuke was the popular guy who every girl liked while Sakura was a self-conscious follower trying her best to win his attention but always coming up short. While canon hasn't (yet) shown any interaction between them post-time-skip, I think SasuSaku has a better chance now more than it ever did: they've both undergone extreme transformations that, ultimately, will bring them closer together. I think this development has that same rough-start-but-convenient-circumstances-and-true-love-win-out feel that's so typical of fairytales.

iulia

i'm like batman in pink

{asst. organizer % asst. editor % asst. coordinator % com & cd layouts % moderator}

author = [flights of fancy + ecto + sorry + the artist] | collab = [la carestia] |

concept = [lamentations + mauer]

- ✿ If SasuSaku was a fairytale, it'd be 'The Frog Prince' by the Brothers Grimm. Except, Sakura would be the frog and Sasuke, he would be the princess (prissy little thing). But you'll have to erase that part where the princess asks for her golden ball and promises to love the frog and kiss it. Sasuke would simply not ask for such a thing. The princess is, instead, the adventurous type who is on a not-so-noble quest for revenge. And, in this story, the frog is just a persistent fellow who insists on making the princess give up on her quest. More importantly though, this version wouldn't be the fluffy version -- no, it would be the original morbid version, where the self-centered princess throws the



frog against the wall in disgust (although, if the princess were to be honest with herself, she would have to admit that she liked the attention – hence giving the frog her gratitude before introducing it to the nice castle wall). Mind you, the frog won't transform instantly. No, the impact against the wall would teach the frog (who really was hideous at first) certain lessons in life and put it in the right path to becoming -- well -- a prince. Then, said frog-turned-prince will return to dazzle the princess. :D And the frog will forgive the princess for that whole wall-incident and for being such a jerk. The princess, in turn, will let that frog into his life and give it the love it so desires.

- ☛ I'm thinking that it would have an ending similar to that of Rumpelstiltskin, wherein something was lost, but a more important thing was gained. The king and queen's golden castle turned back to straw with the death of Rumpelstiltskin—but at least they got to keep their child. Sasuke and Sakura, too, would probably have a not-so-perfect ending, but they would be together – and that's the important thing. There's hope amidst the troubles and the worries and the problems, and in the end, they would come out scarred and wounded, but not broken, never that.
- ☛ The thing about Sasuke and Sakura is that they're such three-dimensional, grayish characters, that it would be impossible to put them in the linear singularity of a fairytale. Theirs is a tale where the princess (Sasuke – and yes, I do like the idea of Sasuke as a prissy princess) does not want to be saved and the knight (Sakura) stumbles and falls and almost gives up on her quest. They're certainly not the most ideal characters for a fairytale. But the elements of a fairytale are already there, and if they just give each other a chance (if Sasuke would stop running and Sakura would hold steadfast in her aim), then they would certainly achieve that happily-ever-after that they both deserve.

japanesebread
short and spazzy
author = [cry]

- ☛ Sasuke would come back to Konoha, for one. So that he can be with his one-true-love. LOL.
- ☛ Happily-ever-after? Given how incredibly impossible it seems now.
- ☛ ANGST! ANGST! ANGST!

larsgo
author = [jizz in my pants]

- ☛ {as larsgo or named as grandlaserny in livejournal.com, she is also one of the members of fracturedtales project. She could not answer the questions due to pressing matters. One of the oldest sasusaku fans, as some of the authors here had already seen her wandering around the Simply Love



Forums that was managed by twinbells. We're extremely proud that she graced us with her presence.}

m. melancholica

a rare, sociophobic species characterized by an incurable Escapist tendency, often through fangirling against-all-odds OTPs & AMFOTA boytoys.

{asst. editor % consultant}

author = [the endymion effect + nadir] | collab = [and so the snake fell in love with a slug]

... I want the one where somebody dies! And I know which one: *The Little Mermaid*. None of the colorful, musical world of Ariel and her friends—I mean, Hans Anderson's, the version that scarred a certain kid raised on Sesame Street & Disney movies because the mermaid dies! T_T I know it's a stretch, but it's the sort of sasusaku that's deliciously heart-rending~ Just as the mermaid and the prince exist in different worlds, so do Sasuke and Sakura. Sakura has her issues, but she had family and friends; the rich, multi-faceted ocean of the mermaid is like the normalcy that has nurtured Sakura. They meet, really meet, at a tempest: in crises does Sakura only see Sasuke beyond the genius loner on a pedestal. Only in crises does Sasuke see beyond his superficial, weak, and flaky impression of Sakura. Sakura has saved, will save, Sasuke in less obvious ways than pulling him off a sinking ship. Sakura has journeyed so far, transformed as much as the mermaid who lost her voice and grew legs. Sakura's friends has made sacrifices, too—not necessarily for her, the way the mermaid's sisters sold their hair to the witch for a chance to save the mermaid from becoming flotsam after the prince marries another—but they have all lost fundamental things, fragments of themselves in their struggles.

As of writing this, I hear that Sakura has set off, resolved to kill Sasuke, just like the mermaid approaches the prince's matrimonial bed, dagger at hand. I will not, at this point, say that Sakura will throw away the knife and martyr herself for her prince's sake, the prince who was, is, fond of her, but did not value her as she deserved (And what does she deserve? Has she spoken, acted, sufficiently to claim?) I will not say that Sakura will linger in the Air for all eternity to earn a soul, a seemingly twisted, romantic sacrifice where in she takes up self-flagellation and purgatory for another man's mistake. Sakura may well kill Sasuke. And hey, he's made his bed. Let him lie in it. As long as somebody dies in the end. XD

(*cough* Well, that was cheerful up there. Fine, fine. I'll make it up in the next questions.)

The ultimate fairytale ending for Sasusaku is something I am well-versed in, just because this is the sort of ending I love to read and write in fanfics: Sasuke's redemption and Sakura's transcendence. Sasuke will rehabilitate in Konoha. It won't be easy but Sakura will be there, supporting him all the way. Sakura will be the ultimate supermom, juggling a clan restitution project with a prodigious career as a (soon-to-be) legendary mednin. Their friends will be there, supportive and equally successful. They will live, learn, and grow old together. It's a rosy, beautiful dream



that I can't quite reconcile with the reality of things, unfortunately. I cannot~ Woe is me!

This is a conundrum we must divide and conquer. Sasuke's life story of woe and tragedy, coupled with his prickly personality and immense pride, may not be appealing at first. Once we add in his annoyingly Adonis attributes and his deep-seated insecurities, we have one compelling damsel-in-dis—er, wounded prince. Sakura is often painted weak and vulnerable, but it's exactly these that make her transcendence all the more riveting. Be it with her intelligence, hard work, or weird Inner voice, she overcomes her mediocrity to become the heroine. Unwillingly or overenthusiastically, she'll come a'slithering out from pre-mating brumation and sweep Princess Sasuslug off his psuedo foot. They'll endure against all the odds of interspecies love and live happily ever after! See how far-fetched but oh-so soul-searing thrilling that was? Exactly.

miko-chan

a poor creature who fears sisters and loves all that are sweet and glittery

{head organizer % asst. layout % online coordinator % transactions and communications moderator % head lackey of the don }

author = [red carpet + lamentations + mauer + ad astra] | collab = [and so the snake fell in love with a slug + la carestia]

- ☞ Rapunzel will really be perfect! There are symbolisms in that fairytale that will really suit their characters and relationships. Most especially at the end when the witch cut off her hair and banished her from the land, while the prince was blinded as his punishment. It seems so beautiful that even though the prince was blinded and the princess was already ugly and torn, they still find each other and accept their scarred appearances.
- ☞ The only thing I want from them is either they give me babies, have a big stinking family—complete with a pet dog/snake/slug/flatworm...or they just warm me to a pile of bubbly goo if they just have a small moment together, having a coherent conversation and their hands almost linking, but not touching.
- ☞ Fairytales are essentials for a romantic soul and unfortunately, this pairing became one of the necessary ingredients to my staple amount of romance. It's practically on my list as one of those pairings that made an impression on me, making it a perfect example of a fairytale.

mrie

well-intentioned monster who happens to love words, possibilities, and pretty boys.

author = [corona and lime]

- ☞ The one where the princess saves the prince after knocking some sense into him.
- ☞ “Hey, Sakura, I got over being stupid, thanks to that punch in the head. Marry me?” Then, after a couple angst fests and pity parties, they live happily ever after.



- Because they are tragic and beautiful and they are possibility and lost-chances embodied. Because there is room in their story for hope, faith, and redemption. Because I say so, dammit!

myr

:p one word: fierce.

cover artist : romance [sleeping beauty] + cd cover [legend of orihime & houkiboshi]

- Little Mermaid.* Because it emphasizes Sakura's love and Sasuke's blindness and ignorance. And the neighboring princess could be Itachi.
- Sasuke will be a good boy again, after receiving Sakura's kiss
- The undying love Sakura has for Sasuke, and their tragic/ironic fate.

ohwhatsherface

i need more sentences.

author = [before he cheats + white walls + falling into history]

- Beauty and the Beast! Because Sasuke is hot and Sakura is a beast (in the coolest way possible).
- LOL would it be wrong to just write "sex"?
- Because they most definitely will get their happy ending. :)

pet

i am the SUPA-FLY TNT.

cover artist: [pinky promise (canon) + anastacia]

- Anything fairytale, as long as it has a happy ending.
- Them kicking back in the Bahamas drinking tequila.
- 'Cuz it's made of angst, sexy, revenge, love, and awesome. Perfect storytelling ingredients.

property of the uchiha

i was a pretty pink cactus once upon a time

cover artist: [angst: beauty and the beast]

- No fairytale compares to SasuxSaku. Therefore, I refuse to base it on a tale that actually exists. Sasuke would be Ghost Rider and Sakura would be Maid Marian. And somehow, they would make it work because that's just how they are.
- All the other men (and women) who are ever paired up with Sasuke and Sakura will become priests and nuns, fall in love with someone else, or disappear.
- Because it is the ultimate happy ending.

psychedelic_aya

a strange and funny girl, and really, that's all you need to know.

author = [autompne]

- It would be Bambi. Because during my childhood, I cried about it too.



- ☞ I don't need to go into details. Becase really, "...and they lived happily ever after" is enough.
- ☞ Because Dumbledore said love makes great stories, can save all, and I believe him.

polly-chan

i love SasuSaku, cherryblossoms, stars, green, babies, and POTATOES!

promotions artist: three banners

- ☞ If SasuSaku was a fairytale, they would have a story where there is a prince who will save the princess from the baddies. There are lots of hardships to be face but in the end, love will still prevail over all. Just like what actually is happening in the current story. Prince Sakura will come to save princess Sauce-kay XD
- ☞ Sakura with lots of little Sasukes around her.
- ☞ Fairytales is always all about obtaining happiness... And Sasuke is Sakura's happiness

sakuraxkisu

author = [amore]

snappleducated

a teenage girl who would be a lot cooler if she didn't typo so much

author = [stillborn sighs]

- ☞ *The Princess and the Frog.* I think Sasuke would benefit from being small and green and warty for a while. It'd build character.
- ☞ Well, first, there needs to be some conflict resolution, like knocking Sasuke out, followed by a speedy trip to Vegas and a love suite. Then they could be one of those couples that wear matching outfits!
- ☞ Because theirs is a love undying.

the blanket

my hobbies include falling off maps, losing my way, and having epiphanies at inappropriate moments.

{online moderator}

author = [cannonball + under the sea + scratch]

- ☞ Given the proposition that they are a fairy tale, though, I would say their story is very much reminiscent of the *Odyssey*. Faithful Penelope and wandering Odysseus -- and fairy tales can be drawn from any tradition so the *Odyssey* counts, right? RIGHT?
- ☞ Are we talking canon here? I want happiness for them -- but of I don't think the notion of "happily ever after" works out here, as well as it might in other formats. Maybe just an ending where they come to an understanding between them -- whatever that might mean. Epic as they are, I want their "ending" to come in increments, if that makes any sense -- the understanding that an "ending," whatever that might mean, is a process, as opposed to a resolution.
- ☞ While I don't particularly see SasuSaku as a fairy tale in the conventional sense, I do find their story epic, which is why it's so difficult for me to resist writing about them.



There's so much you can take from their relationship -- so many motifs and possibilities open for interpretation. I think fairy tales work in the same way. Also, Sasuke would make the PRETTIEST PRINCESS EVER.

velvet_strings

a lovable camera whore

{head layout & illustrator % asst. creative director}

collab = [not a date + je ne sais quoi]

- ✦ The legend of *Malakas at Maganda*. (Strong and Beautiful), emerging from the bamboo stalk. But of course, The one who wears the pants, as *Malakas*, is Sakura, while Sasuke is *Maganda*.
- ✦ I just need them to be together. Not necessarily perfect, but at least they will have a degree of understanding.
- ✦ A fairytale is something that's a part of my life, something I grew up with. I can say the same to this pairing.

white_epitome

small...but still small.

{head layout & illustrator % asst. creative director }

collab = [not a date + je ne sais quoi]

- ✦ The Frog and the Princess.
- ✦ It'll be simple: Sasuke will at least try to make amends to Sakura.
- ✦ Sasuke came from a noble clan, Sakura a normal family. They have history, like those children morning shows we watch. And they have drama, so they can be a fairytale.



I Illustrations

Upon A Time [white epitome]
Pinky Promise [samurai-pet]

FLUFF : RAPUNZEL [gabzilla]
The Slug Snake Affair [crazy-silly-me]
In The Mood Of Love [sorceressmyr]
All I Want Is You [plumfit]
PAC-MAN [samurai-pet]
Wedding Reflections [polly-chan]
Unwind [raccoon-ransom]
I'm Yours [iulia]
Sakura's Pet [anna-kokoro]
Not A Date [white epitome]
A Sasusaku Day [polly-chan]
Roxxerz [samurai-pet]
Under the Sea [iulia]

ANGST : BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
[property of the uchiha]
Floating [miko]
Down [theredphantom]
My Beautiful Count [sorceressmyr]
Light [sorceressmyr]
Just Today [fey-rayen]

So Close So Far [nssavva]
Innocence [regi-chan]
Story in My Head [ninjin-nezumi]
Feeling [damleg]
Drown in it [property of the uchiha]
White Walls [looney lolita]

ROMANCE : SLEEPING BEAUTY
[sorceressmyr]
Lollipop [sorceressmyr]
Morning Light [sorceressmyr]
Date 2 [polly-chan]
Colors and Clichés [nami86]
Crimson Ribbon [arriku]
Sweet Lightly [regi-chan]
Sweet November [byshamora]
Under the Same Sky [nami86]
My Light... [nami86]
Cinderella Ball [theredphantom]
Reckless [nami86]
Panels [burnedbacon]
Redemption [looneylolita]



Glossary

¹A common Italian revenge phrase.

²You're My Number One - A popular song commercial in the Philippines, sung by singer-actress Sharon Cuneta and her daughters Frankie and Miel.

³ Lyrics of 'The Little Things' by Colbie Caillat

⁴ verses from Robert Burn's *A Red Red Rose*.

Aa – 'sure' or 'yes' (Japanese)

Ad Astra – To The Stars

Amore – Love (Italian)

Anata – literally means 'you', but is commonly used by lovers and so can mean 'darling'

Aniki – very polite word for 'older brother' (Japanese)

Apophallation - Method used by hermaphroditic slugs when their male genitalia cannot be retracted during copulation. With the use of their radula, they masticate their tight-spiral organ and successfully separate.

Apfelsaftschorle – a popular german soda. It is made of carbonated mineral water and apple juice. This drink can be sold commercially or done at home or bars.

Autoapophallation – method used by hermaphroditic slugs when their male genitalia cannot be retracted during copulation. With the use of their radula, they masticate their tight-spiral organ and successfully separate.

Cetatea – 'citadel' (Romanian)

Goukon – Japanese dating party

Higgins – surname of Sakura's American voice actor

Hikawa Maru – A Japanese Ocean Liner from Yokohoma. During 1941, it was used as a Jewish refugee ship. In the midst of World War II, it became a hospital ship for the Allied Forces.

Je Ne Sais Quoi – 'I do not know what' (French)

Kaichou – 'chief' (Japanese)

Kampai – 'cheers' or 'hooray' (Japanese)

Kantoku – 'director' (Japanese)

Katana – Japanese broad sword

Kushi Dango – sweet dumpling

La Carestia – 'The Famine' (Italian)

Lowenhall – surname of Sasuke's American voice actor

Mauer – 'wall' (German)

Meningococemia Prophylaxis – a countermeasure to prevent being infected with meningococemia

Milankovitch Cycles – describes the collective effects of changes in the Earth's movements upon its climate

Mukashi, Mukashi – 'once upon a time' (Japanese)

Ni hen ke ai – 'you're so cute' (Chinese)



Niisan – ‘older brother’ (Japanese)

Nori – seaweed

Ohayou – ‘Good morning’ (Japanese)

Ojichan – ‘uncle’ (Japanese)

Okaasan – ‘mother’ (Japanese)

Okashira – ‘boss’ (Japanese)

Omiai – Japanese wedding meet-up

Onesama – very polite word for ‘older sister’ (Japanese)

Oni Gaijins – literally means ‘foreign monsters’; refers to foreigners (Japanese)

Onigiri – Japanese snack; riceball

Otou-san – ‘father’ (Japanese)

Otouto – formal word for ‘younger brother’ (Japanese)

para para dance – a popular synchronized group dance

Radula – orifice of a slug

Sudest Munti – ‘Southern Mountains’ (Romanian)

Tadaima – ‘I’m home’ (Japanese)

Taicho – ‘captain’ (Japanese)

Tasukete – ‘help me’ (Japanese)

Teka-maki – tuna roll

Teme – ‘bastard’ (Japanese)

Torii – ‘temple gates’ (Japanese)

Vest Mare – ‘Western plains’ (Romanian)

Wo shi dao – ‘me too’ (Chinese)

Wo xi huan ni – ‘I like you’ (Chinese)

Yamero – ‘stop’ (Japanese)

Yukata – summer robe of Japanese

Yurei(-kun) – ‘ghost’ (Japanese)

ken (憲, "law") / *hei* (兵, "soldier") - these characters are written on the white armbands (worn on their left upper arm) as part of the uniform of the *Kempeitai*, the military police of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. They are the Asian equivalent of the Nazis

うちは – hiragana For ‘Uchiha’ (Japanese)





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